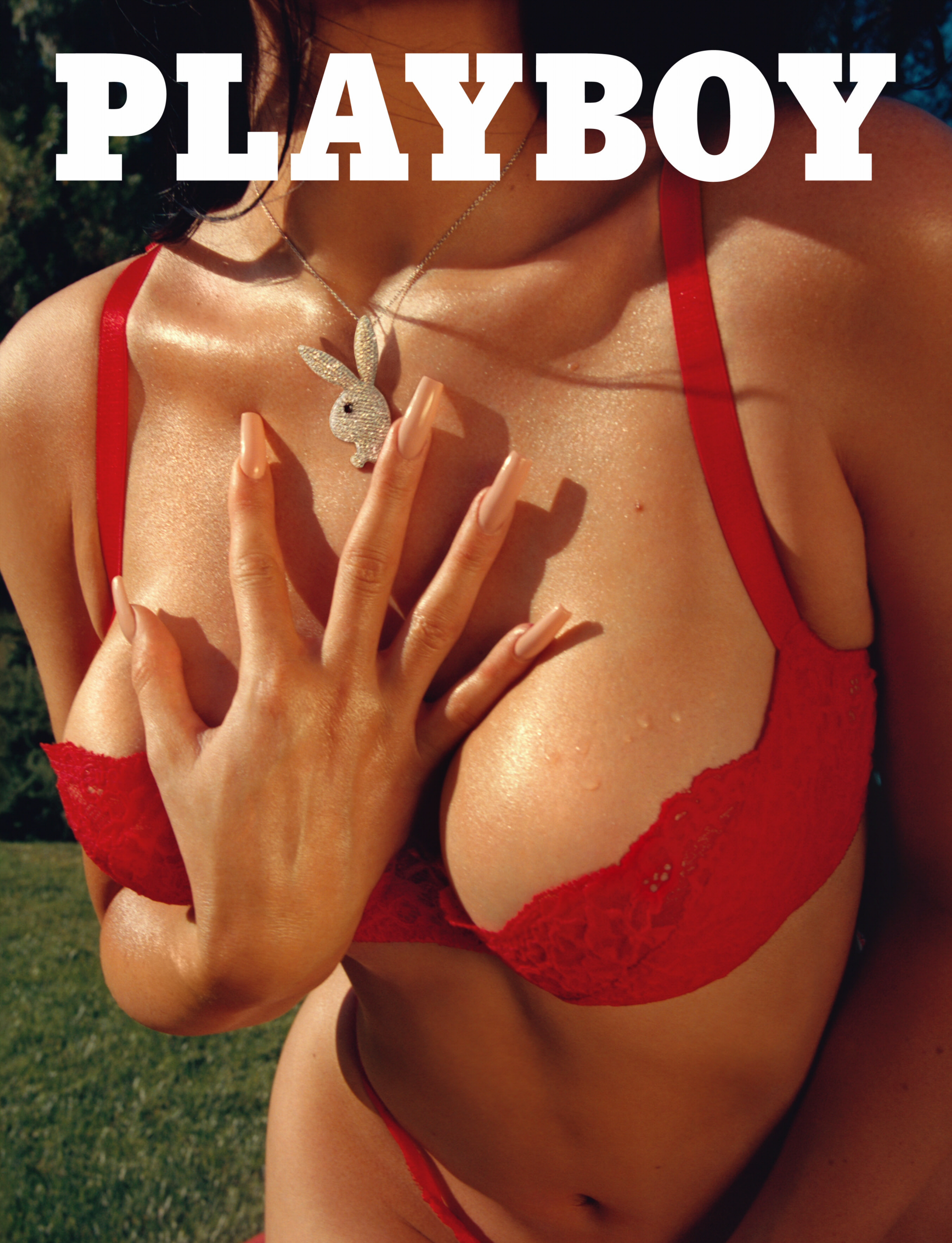
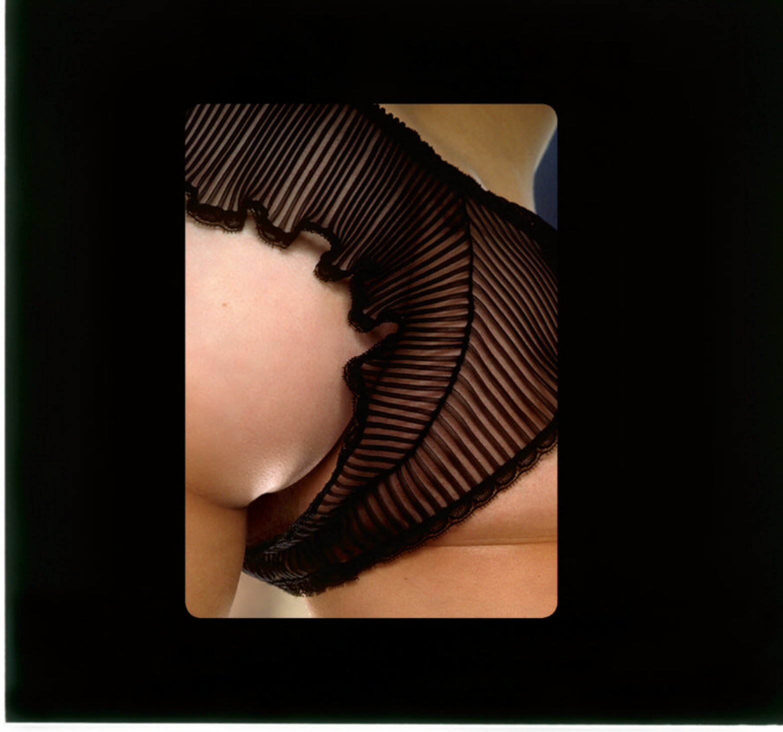
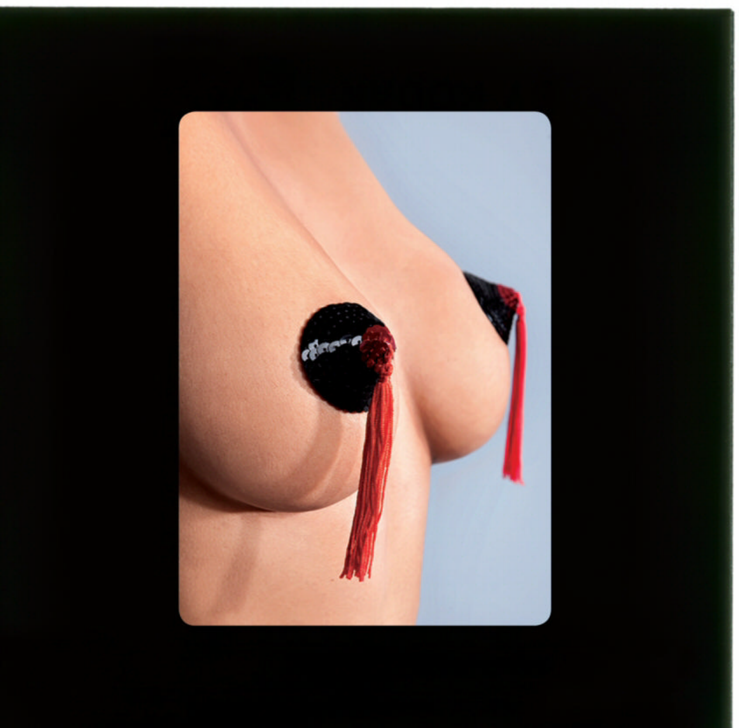
PLAYBOY







MANCY GANT

i: @mancygant

"It's rewarding to have your voice heard, which is why I always want to communicate some sort of sentiment through my work," says the portraitist behind *Face-to-Face With Toro y Moi,* our feature on Chaz Bear. "Can I make you feel what that moment was like?" Gant also collaborated with Bear on the music video for "Ordinary Pleasure," a track off Toro y Moi's latest LP, *Outer Peace.* Gant's other directing credits include the six-minute short *The Falling Man* for rapper Duckwrth.

SIMON HANSELMANN

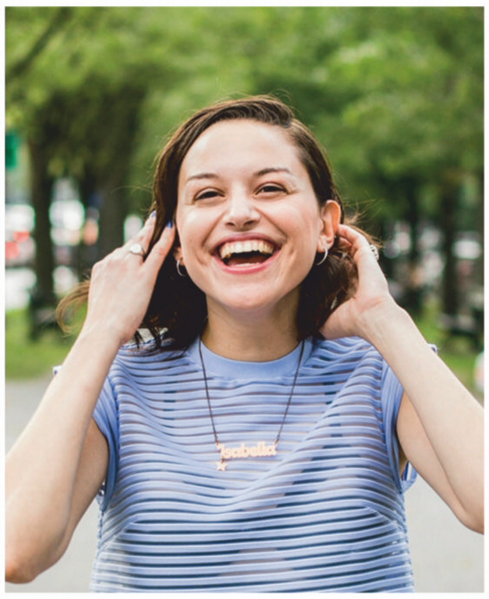
i: @simon.hanselmann

The Tasmanian-born cartoonist, known for his *New York Times* best-selling series *Megg & Mogg,* created the six-page comic *Megg's Pleasure* as an homage to PLAYBOY's classic *Little Annie Fanny* series. Like the Harvey Kurtzman and Will Elder character, the twosome are humorously hedonistic. "This felt like a natural fit for Megg and Mogg," Hanselmann says. "They're sexual warriors on the societal battlefield."

KIMBERLY DREW

i: @museummammy

Winner of A.I.R. Gallery's inaugural Feminist Curator Award and former social media manager for the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Drew will soon release her first book, *Black Futures.* A champion of black contemporary art, the curator switches her focus to the oeuvre of Marilyn Minter and pleasure in art for *Pussy Power.* "Experiencing pleasure is about being vulnerable," she says. "To reach ecstasy, one has to undergo surrender. It can be a surrender forged by strength or defeat, but it's a surrender nonetheless."



ISABELIA HERRERA

t: @jabladoraaa

"In a world that socializes women to deny pleasure at every turn, seeking it is a form of self-care," says the Dominican culture writer. For *Let's Play,* Herrera profiles Emilia Ortiz, a *bruja* turned mental-health advocate who uses social media to share her spiritual gifts. Herrera's insightful pieces for *The New York Times,* Slate and Remezcla earned her a spot on *Forbes*'s "30 Under 30 in Media" list in 2017. Her writing focuses on music, pop culture and Latinx identity.

KANYA IWANA

i: @kanyaiwana

"If we portray only a minor chunk of people, we do the world a disservice," says Iwana. "So many are concerned about the idea of the 'other,' when the truth is we're all alike—as insignificant as we are special." The photographer carries this appreciation for diversity into her shoots with renowned cannabis chef Andrea Drummer (*High Dining*) and November Playmate Gillian Chan (*Better Nature*).

ATIBA JEFFERSON

i: @atibaphoto

For *Man in His Domain,* the L.A.-based lifestyle photographer shadowed Keith Hufnagel, the skate mogul behind HUF, to capture his relationship with the streets of San Francisco. "I've looked up to Hufnagel since I was a kid and have had the opportunity to photograph him several times," says Jefferson, who contributes to *Thrasher* magazine and whose clients have included Nike, Supreme and the L.A. Lakers. "I see him as both a hero and an old friend."

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DR. CHRIS DONAGHUE

i: @drdonaghue

The goal of this issue's Playboy Advisor? To remind us that sex is supposed to be fun. The *Loveline* host and author of *Rebel Love: Break the Rules, Destroy Toxic Habits and Have the Best Sex of Your Life* says, "Our culture is extremely pleasure-phobic. What's more, capitalist culture tells us our worth should be tied to productivity. That's why seeking pleasure is such a powerful act of resistance."

ARIELA KOZIN

t: @arielakozin

"Kylie Jenner is one of the most famous women on the planet, and everyone thinks they know her because she grew up on TV. But she's incredibly shy and private," says the PLAYBOY features editor. For entry into Jenner's world, Kozin called in the mogul's beau, rapper Travis Scott (last featured in our Spring 2019 issue), to interview her and act as creative director for her cover story. Kozin also oversaw *Bliss Your Heart, High Dining, School of Pop Starring King Princess* and *Face-to-Face With Toro y Moi.*

JAMIE NELSON

i: @jamienelson6

A jet-setting photographer whose portfolio includes album artwork for Lily Allen and Gwen Stefani, Nelson has also shot for *Vogue, Harper's Bazaar* and *Vanity Fair.* Her first PLAYBOY commission, *Vice Land,* is a lucent ode to the seven deadly sins that gluts her long fascination with the Rabbit. "My house has vintage PLAYBOY art hung throughout," she says, "and my 1968 Mustang is an original 'Playmate Pink' convertible!"

VINCE MYO M. AUNG

i: @vinceaung

"I want to tell a story rather than just take a pretty photo," says Aung, who captured the metamorphoses of a young musician for *School of Pop Starring King Princess.* "That's why I love how we portray King Princess as different characters." The Burmese photographer says he's inspired by works that blur the distinction between time and space—a theme recognizable in his PLAYBOY contribution.

JELANI COBB

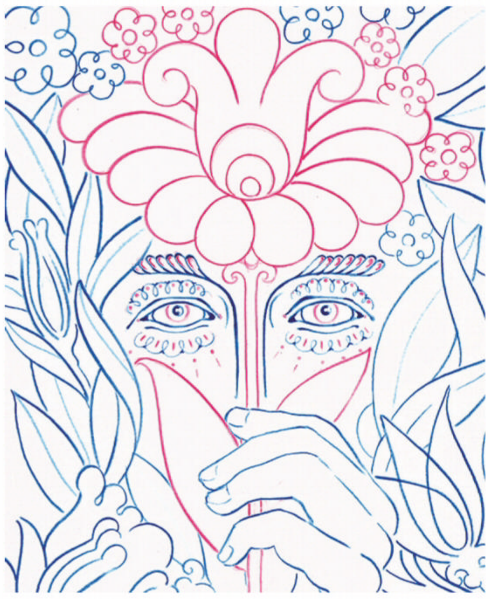
t: @jelani9

In *The Pleasure of Not Being Respectable,* the Columbia University professor and *New Yorker* columnist explores the nuanced relationship between race and indulgence. "So much of what I've written about has related to the pain and difficulty associated with race," Cobb says. "I wanted to look at things from the opposite side. What would the world make of a black hedonist, and how would someone like that even come into existence?"

ALPHACHANNELING

i: @alphachanneling

Pleasure—which the erotic illustrator views as "the overwhelming state of being in harmony, where the boundary of what is internal and external dissolves"—is the driving force behind Alphachanneling's artwork. Featured in this issue's *Playboy Advisor* alongside sex tips and relationship advice, Alphachanneling's illustrations of bodies engaging in various forms of bliss evoke both grace and carnality, and are a toast to sexual liberation.



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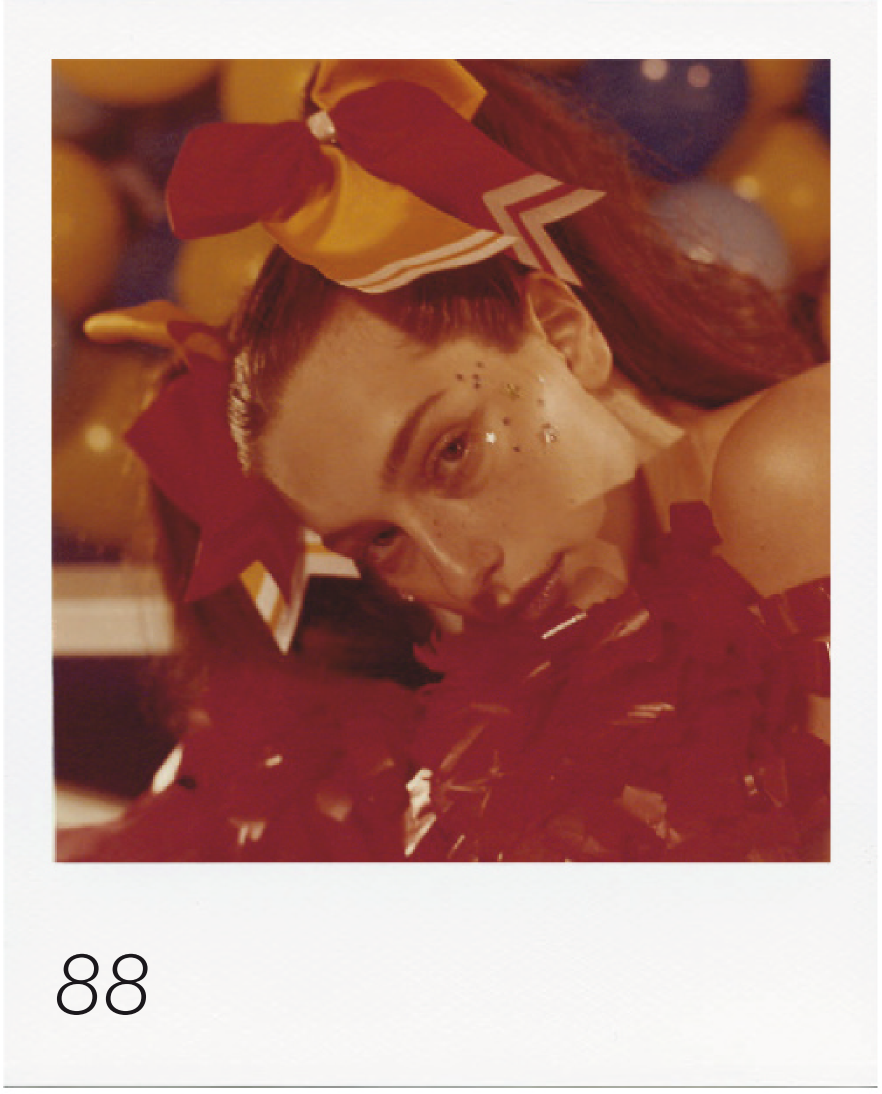
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PLAYBOY

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PLAYBOY
BY
PACSUN

A Letter from the Editors

Here at PLAYBOY, we're feeling good. We're closing out our 65th year with an issue dedicated to pleasure. It is a celebration of the things that bring us joy: sex, art, food, music, spiritual connection, travel, cannabis and community. And did we mention sex?

Half a century ago, our society was in a state of upheaval, and we were helping usher in the sexual revolution—a new era of freedom, expression and love. Today, we're calling for a new revolution: the pleasure revolution—an era in which embracing and indulging in the arousal of the senses without precondition or shame is not only acceptable but something to shout about from the rooftops. In this cultural and political moment (and let's make sure it's just that—a moment), there are so many forces that seek to deny us pleasure.

Our 2019 call to arms is founded on the principle that pleasure is a human right. We want everyone to be free to pursue pleasure. And when we say everyone, we really, genuinely mean everyone.

In this issue, we aren't only showcasing the artists and creators who bring us joy; we're also shining a light on visionaries and revolutionaries who are fighting to expand access to pleasure for all.

In these pages, we'll introduce you to King Princess (*School of Pop*), who is promoting a new kind of sex positivity through her music. We also profile Anand Giridharadas (*The Repairman*), who is taking on America's 0.1 percenters about the damage they're doing to democracy.

We welcome wunderkind playwright Jeremy O. Harris, subject of the *Playboy Interview,* who blew the roof off the New York theater scene before turning 30. We hear from *Silicon Valley*'s Thomas Middleditch (*20Q*), who puts more faith in sex than in the afterlife. Thank the Lord. And in *The Pleasure of Not Being Respectable,* Jelani Cobb confronts the historical injustices of being a black man with the unexpected power of not giving a fuck.

Hedonism takes a culinary turn in *High Dining,* a story about cannabis chef and activist Andrea Drummer, who will soon open the nation's first cannabis café. Meanwhile, journalist Michelle Janikian sheds her ego in the Yucatán jungle (*Bliss Your Heart*); Edward Norton finds his bliss in his latest directorial effort (*Norton's Noir Nouveau*); and Daisy Alioto ponders the relationship between pleasure, art, consciousness and corporate influence (*This Is Your Brain on Euphoria*).

Of course, we couldn't assemble a 234-page dedication to pleasure without celebrating the human form. We're proud to reveal never-before-published work from groundbreaking artist Marilyn Minter. Alongside Minter, we offer the titillating creative collaborations of three of our favorite photographers—Ali Mitton, Kanya Iwana and Jennifer Stenglein—and our newest Playmates, Hilda Dias Pimentel, Gillian Chan and Jordy Murray. Each pictorial takes the idea of beauty in electrifying new directions.

Which brings us to….

Business mogul, Instagram icon, television star and now PLAYBOY cover woman Kylie Jenner. *Wild in Love,* shot by Sasha Samsonova, is an eight-page dedication to Jenner's relationship with partner Travis Scott, who creative-directed her pictorial. When it comes to pleasure, love is paramount.

As we close out our 65th year, we invite you to join our pleasure revolution. We hope you enjoy.

The pleasure is ours.

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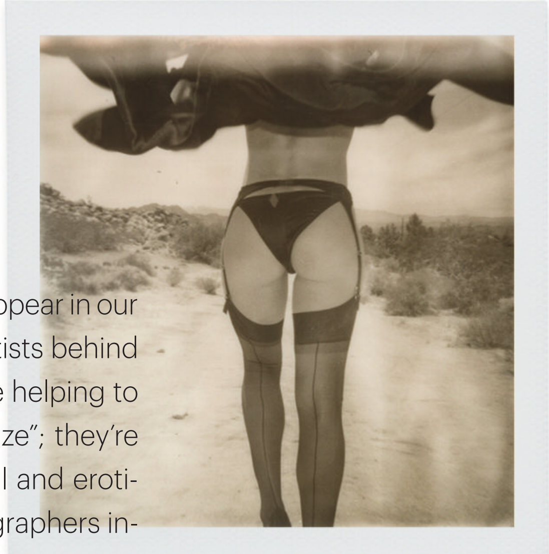
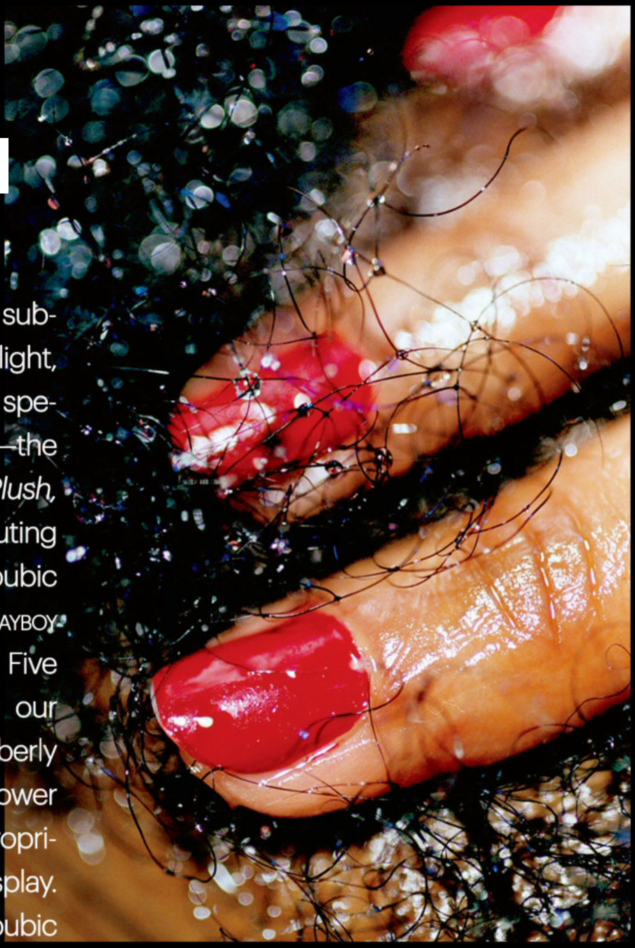
Behind the Lens



It's easy to become so entranced by the women who appear in our pages that you may not always consider the visual artists behind the images. But you should. These photographers are helping to evolve what we internally refer to as "the Playboy gaze"; they're the curators of our representations of beauty, arousal and eroticism. It's no coincidence that our contributing photographers include creatives who challenge tired, sexist standards of beauty throughout their portfolios. This is especially true of our Playmate photographers, whose charge is to make their subjects feel simultaneously comfortable, sexy and in command.

We're proud to recognize the powerful women responsible for this issue's Playmate pictorials. Ali Mitton, who last photographed April 2019 Playmate Fo Porter, flew with Hilda Dias Pimentel to Majorca, Spain, where the October Playmate unleashed her jubilant energy. Meanwhile, Kanya Iwana headed to the beach in Malibu, California with November Playmate Gillian Chan, and Australian transplant Jennifer Stenglein ventured to Joshua Tree, California with Jordy Murray, our December Playmate. We know that those who stand behind the lens are as important to representation as those in front of it, and we celebrate these women and their gorgeous, inspiring work.

Au Naturel in Focus

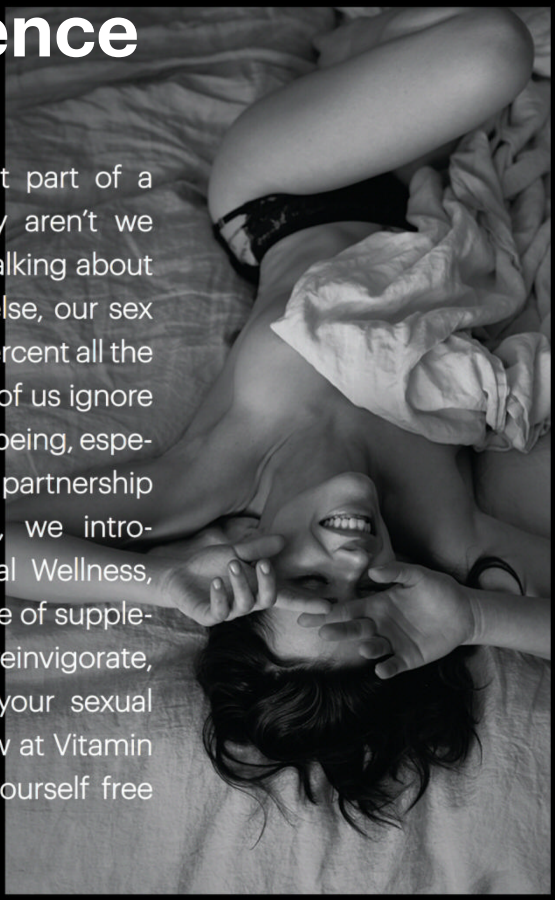


The works of Marilyn Minter, subject of this issue's artist spotlight, *Pussy Power*, appeared in a special edition of PLAYBOY in 2014—the same year she released *Plush*, a collection of artwork saluting all shades and lengths of pubic hair. But some of Minter's PLAYBOY images went unpublished. Five years later, she returns to our pages to discuss with Kimberly Drew (together with Minter, lower right) what is deemed "appropriate" in the realm of sexual display. "There's nothing wrong with pubic hair, but it has been totally erased in art history," Minter says. While negotiating the publication of Minter's PLAYBOY commission (as well as new, never-before-seen work), Senior Editor Liz Suman also arranged for her to speak at the "Art of Sexuality" panel hosted by Playboy in New York City this June. "Learning that not all the previous images had been published was exciting, knowing I could consciously publish the work today," Suman says. "The stigma surrounding pubic hair exemplifies the conflict within dialogues about women defining their own beauty and pleasure."

Shakespeare in the Garden

Playboy's annual Midsummer Night's Dream lingerie party returned this July to Sin City, taking over Marquee Nightclub at the Cosmopolitan of Las Vegas. Inspired by Shakespeare's classic tale of restless lovers on a mystical search for their soulmates, Playboy partnered with Tao Group to transform the nightlife destination into an enchanted forest, complete with spins by DJ Mustard. The event was hosted by a cast of Centerfolds, including August 2018 Playmate Lorena Medina (pictured left).

Confidence Is Sexy



Sex is an important part of a healthy life, so why aren't we more comfortable talking about it? Like everything else, our sex lives won't be 100 percent all the time, and too many of us ignore that part of our well-being, especially as we age. In partnership with AVS Products, we introduce Playboy Sexual Wellness, a comprehensive line of supplements designed to reinvigorate, repair and restore your sexual health. Available now at Vitamin Shoppe. Consider yourself free to pursue pleasure.

A Tribute to the Secretly Serious Paul Krassner

Paul Krassner, leader of the Yippie movement, passed away in July at the age of 87. A prominent force at PLAYBOY, the longtime editor recruited major names including former Editorial Director Arthur Kretchmer and Lenny Bruce. (Krassner edited the comedian's autobiography.) Despite his strong opinions, Krassner kept an open mind, even agreeing to debate Andrew Breitbart for our December 2011 issue. Former Deputy Editor Stephen Randall fondly remembers Krassner as "a cultural gadfly who knew everyone worth knowing and who took things seriously—but hid that he was taking them seriously."

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN A WITCH GETS WI-FI? MEET THE WOMAN WHO USES SACRED SPIRITUALITY TO ENCHANT OUR DAILY LIVES (AND MAYBE EVEN SAVE OUR MENTAL HEALTH)

EMILIA ORTIZ

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **BRAD OGBONNA**

BY **ISABELIA HERRERA**

The *bruja*—Spanish for "witch"—sitting across from me proudly sports a BROOKLYN chest tattoo in sprawling Gothic letters. I first notice it peeking out from under her baby-pink tube top, announcing her roots with the same defiance as her sharp Nuyorican accent when she greets me at the East Williamsburg vegan diner Champs—a favorite of hers, primarily for its seitan asada. "How y'all tricked my Puerto Rican ass?" she says jokingly about the fake meat before settling on a more indulgent (though still vegan) meal: macaroni and cheese, a side of fries and a banana milkshake.

Emilia Ortiz's playful irreverence has no doubt burnished her internet fame, but that fame can mostly be attributed to what she promulgates. She's part *bruja,* part healer and part mental-health advocate, and she draws on an eclectic collection of spiritual practices, including candle work, reiki and meditation, to help people live better lives. In minute-long Instagram videos—she practices both privately and publicly—Ortiz doles out affirmations and guidance to some 227,000 followers. She's often sitting in front of her vast collection of houseplants. They're named, of course: Chachi, Rosa, Conejo Malo, etc.

Instead of the hushed tones you might expect from a counselor, Ortiz punctuates her videos with expletives: "In case you ain't already know, I'ma tell your ass: You are a magnificent-ass being. Your guts are made of motherfucking stardust, okay?... I've been checking up on your ass in the collective consciousness, and let me tell you: *You're beautiful."*

This tough talk distinguishes her from her peers—a growing cavalcade of women who are reclaiming previously denounced forms of spirituality. In pop culture, online and in real life, there has been a resurgence of sorcery. Consider the recent flood of witch-inspired television shows, such as *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina, American Horror Story,* the *Charmed* reboot and *Game of Thrones.* As of 2014, approximately 700,000 American adults identified as Wiccan or pagan, compared with just 8,000 Wiccans in 1990. Although organized religion is losing favor among younger people—about 35 percent of millennials don't identify with any religion, according to a 2014 Pew Research Center survey—the cultural demand for spirituality, self-help and wellness is booming.

In Latinx communities in particular, a renewed focus on *brujería* signals a long overdue resurrection of sorts—a revival of the once-condemned mysticism entwined in our heritage. Throughout the colonial era, the Catholic Church persecuted *brujas,* branding them evil enchantresses. Today *brujas* can practice openly, which means a new generation is exploring *brujería* in the same place they explore everything else: the internet.

Ortiz is among the most beloved practitioners working today, and she has always been surrounded by magic. The bodegas in the New York Afro-Caribbean neighborhood where she grew up sold *agua de florida,* a sacred ritual water used for protection spells and cleansings. The local botanica, a sort of apothecary dedicated to folk religion and alternative medicine, stocked every candle, amulet and statuette she would ever need. These totems were part and parcel of her diasporic upbringing.

Her spiritual gifts manifested through her dreams as a young girl. She would astral project, an experience closely related to lucid dreaming. "I would feel everything in my dreams, have control of my dreams and not be able to figure out if I was dreaming or if I was awake," she says. "As a kid, that's fucking scary, so my father would talk to my grandmother about it, and she'd help me figure it out."

It was her *abuela* who first exposed Ortiz to *brujería.* As in many Caribbean families, Ortiz's grandmother cultivated her practice from a wellspring of traditions passed down by ancestors. Some folks are formally initiated into a particular religion, such as Santeria, but many of the skills Ortiz's *abuela* imparted—such as dream interpretation and candle work—are embedded in the cultural memory of Puerto Ricans and other Caribbean communities. Her grandmother's approach was a dexterous bricolage of rites that included everything from *limpias* (cleansings) to numerology.

"Whatever kind of *limpia* you needed, she got you. Whatever kind of *vela* [candle] you needed, she got you," Ortiz says. She recalls a childhood incident when her grandmother dispelled bad spirits from a home her parents had just moved into. "Somebody kept cursing juju on the apartment," she says. Her grandmother doused the place in *agua de florida* and lit a candle (in a bucket so the family cat wouldn't tip it over and set the apartment on fire). According to her mother, Ortiz says, "the house smelled like Florida water for a whole fucking week."

Other lessons included healing techniques, spiritual bathing and menstruation rituals. As Ortiz matured and confronted anxiety and depression in high school, she came to rely on such rituals for strength. That's when she realized she could help others.

Today, Ortiz marries her personal experiences with digital advocacy, offering one-on-one spiritual guidance over the phone and using Instagram to raise awareness and reduce the stigma around mental health, especially in low-income communities of color. Multiple studies have suggested that

> “Y’ALL ARE OUT HERE MAKING THIS A TOURIST DESTINATION.”

depression among Americans of all ages is on the rise, but diagnoses among young people are increasing the fastest, by as much as 47 percent from 2013 to 2016 among 18- to 34-year-olds, according to a 2018 Blue Cross Blue Shield report.

As witchcraft’s influence on the zeitgeist grows, Ortiz’s philosophy of merging the contemporary and the ancestral sets her apart, but it also invites criticism. “While things are evolving, tradition is something that should be kept in mind,” she says. “I’m not a strict traditionalist, because not everybody should be one, but we should be honoring the ancestors in our modern world and continuously re-educate ourselves on the traditional ways.”

Witchcraft’s infiltration of popular culture has sparked a thorny debate around authenticity, exploitation and cultural ownership. With sacred spirituality proliferating on digital spaces, more people are seeking out these alternative forms of healing. This includes outsiders alongside descendants of people who depended on such practices for basic survival. The ayahuasca boom is one example of the rapidly spreading interest in Latin American folkloric healing practices: Stroll the streets of Williamsburg and you’ll find multiple healing centers offering $500 ayahuasca ceremonies guided by amateur practitioners who claim to have studied with Quechua and Shipibo shamans in the Amazon rain forest.

Ortiz’s Caribbean roots mean she doesn’t specifically work with the hallucinogenic brew, but as a *bruja* she remains concerned about unqualified outsiders profiting off ancient practices. “There are so many people trying to preserve this for their culture, and y’all are out here making this a tourist destination,” she says. “Everybody needs to go find their something and figure it out. If we work toward that, where people have reclaimed and are actually practicing their own shit, there will be a point where it’s okay to share knowledge.”

To some Latinx folks, claiming the *bruja* identity is a means of normalizing once-maligned traditions. For others, it’s a form of virtue signaling and clout chasing: a careless erasure of the discipline and years of training required to become a spiritual healer. After all, Ortiz’s public practice lives on a platform known for meme-ifying the human experience and cataloging it for mass validation, not self-preservation. In Puerto Rico in particular, ancestral spiritual practices were attacked throughout the colonial period. As late as 1879, the Spanish crown targeted *espiritismo* by mandating municipal permission for *veladas,* or nighttime séances. Now you can conduct your séance on Instagram Live.

Given the tangled history of oppression, Ortiz views her practice as a way of memorializing our forebears. “We’re honoring ancestors by doing this in the present day, and especially by being open with it. We’re honoring them in a way that’s like, ‘This is how you should have been able to practice, and I honor you by doing it in this way.’ ”

At the same time, she acknowledges the pitfalls of performing certain rituals without proper training—not only out of respect for tradition but in recognition of the potential danger to the self. “Witchcraft and *brujería* are for everybody, but you need to be mindful of what you’re practicing,” she says. “I would not advise anybody to go out and start performing.” She warns me about the dangers of botched ceremonies and individuals who perform divination sessions without the mentorship of an elder.

“If you’re just trying to see if it’s for you, then get some books, go to a botanica and ask about it a bit. But don’t just decide, ‘All right, I’m gonna go cop a Yemaya statue because I like how she looks.’ If you get into this shit the wrong way, you can end up opening yourself up to things you don’t want to touch, and you won’t have anybody to help you remove it or protect you.”

Ortiz admits to being wary of the gatekeeper role, particularly since the meaning of these practices has shifted over time, creating new belief patterns. What *is* the meaning of modern *brujería*, I wonder.

“I’m not an elder yet, and our elders are probably who should be answering such questions,” she says. “They did this through the times when they were persecuted.”

Clearly, Ortiz doesn’t want to position herself as an authority, especially when so much of her advocacy is based on her own experiences. “As I continue to get older, I’m becoming more private with my personal practice,” she says, adding that she hopes to open a family practice focused on accessibility. She doesn’t see herself following a traditional trajectory into priestesshood until she has children—who, she predicts, will have gifts just as she does. “I’ll probably be losing my mind over my children’s intuition and their guides telling me things about myself that I don’t want to hear,” she says with a laugh.

Before we part ways, Ortiz offers this: “I want people to feel like it’s doable. Magic, in this day and age, is not the unknown. It’s making the unknown part of the everyday.” ■

HAHAHA
JOKER
JOKER

WITS AND GIGGLES

With *Joker* bringing an iconic grin back to theaters, we consider why the diabolical hedonist continues to captivate us—even if we never figure him out

BY **ANTHONY BREZNICAN**

It's the bared teeth. Slightly yellow but still gleaming between the candy-apple lips. Clenched and hungry. Ruthless. You wouldn't call the Joker's expression a smile—not unless you were kidding yourself.

There's agony in the villain's bloodthirsty grin. There's rage behind the eyes, battling against the pain for dominance. Maybe there's a smear of satisfaction—let's face it, the man loves his work—but he isn't necessarily happy. He's ferocious.

In the nearly eight decades since he began menacing the good people of Gotham City, the Joker has taken on many identities, worn many faces and had many names. Just like the devil himself.

Still, for all his varying origin stories, he's instantly recognizable, and not just for the green hair, pale skin and purple suits. All Jokers share an unrepentant delight in chaos for its own sake; their antics aim to torment the helpless and innocent, and they're always able to spring surprises on Batman, a hero who prides himself on preparing for the worst.

In its official character biography, DC Comics lists the Joker's defining power as "complete unpredictability." That aligns perfectly with his latest screen incarnation, arriving in theaters October 4. Joaquin Phoenix stars in the savage, heartbreaking R-rated character drama titled simply *Joker.* The film spirals into the ruined psychology of a man named Arthur Fleck, a wannabe stand-up comic who makes ends meet as a clown for hire on Gotham's mean streets. Crippling mental illness and a long history of abuse make it increasingly difficult for Fleck to deal with life's mounting indignities and defeats. He's a constant punch line, until the day he snaps and decides to hit back. But in true Joker fashion, each of the film's seeming revelations only raises more uncertainty about its main character.

"I really like the idea of something that challenges the audience," Phoenix tells PLAYBOY. "Every time I felt we were certain about what motivated his actions, I became less interested. We would constantly try to challenge ourselves while making it. There's not one moment, not one catalyst that creates this character. The pleasure for me in being part of it was not having the easy answers."

The Wayne family looms over the story, but there's no giant bat here; the Joker's nemesis is within. This is the DC Comics version of *Taxi Driver,* or *The King of Comedy* featuring Norman Bates instead of Rupert Pupkin. It's no coincidence that Robert De Niro turns up as a late-night talk-show host revered by the main character.

Arthur Fleck is a name comic book fans won't recognize, an original creation of director and co-writer Todd Phillips, the filmmaker behind the *Hangover* trilogy. Phillips acknowledges that he could have made the same movie about a struggling comedian who turns homicidal without any of the DC Comics framework. But what's the fun in that?

"There's a spirit in me, and I know it's in Joaquin, of taking something revered and fucking with it a little," Phillips says. "The comic-book movie world is this unstoppable machine, and this movie isn't going to stop it and probably won't change it. But to take it and turn it on its head a little? That's actually very Joker."

The film does honor one part of the Joker tradition: It clashes with everything that came before. "It's a great character for filmmakers, writers, comic book artists and actors to have fun with and play with, because there are no rules," Phillips says. "That's the point: What kind of rules are you going to break with the Joker?"

As the villain tells Batman in 1988's graphic novel *The Killing Joke,* written by Alan Moore and illustrated by Brian Bolland, "If I'm going to have a past, I prefer it to be multiple choice! *Ha ha ha!*"

No one needs to hear Batman's origin story again. Schoolchildren can recite the details of Thomas and Martha Wayne's

ILLUSTRATION BY **BUTCHER BILLY**

The past 30 years of cinema have seen a full house of Jokers. **Top left:** Jack Nicholson smiles for the camera in Tim Burton's *Batman,* the actor's highest-grossing film to date. **Above left:** Joaquin Phoenix's iteration of the made-up madman.

Arguably the most depraved Joker, Heath Ledger won a posthumous Oscar for his performance, helping Christopher Nolan's second chapter gross more than $1 billion worldwide. **Opposite page:** Todd Phillips directs Phoenix for his original origin story, co-written by Scott Silver (*8 Mile, The Fighter*).

alleyway death—and young Bruce's vow for justice—like the pledge of allegiance. The Joker, by contrast, has always been an enigma, a chameleon, a shape-shifter. Comic book scribes and moviemakers have outdone one another in recent decades, creating a panoply of alt-histories for this snickering trickster. None of the Joker backstories is more true or valid than any of the others, and that's how DC prefers to keep it.

"Like a lot of mysterious characters, he works because we don't know his origin—and he's often portrayed as an unreliable narrator," says comics legend Jim Lee, DC's publisher and chief creative officer. "Even when he's telling you, 'This is how I came to be,' you don't know if it's the truth or not.'"

That became a defining part of director Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight,* in which Heath Ledger, in his Oscar-winning turn as the Joker, uses a ventriloquist-dummy voice to unspool conflicting tall tales about his ghastly facial scars. Tragic backstories can create empathy for a character, says screenwriter David S. Goyer, who has a "story by" credit on the 2008 box-office juggernaut. The filmmakers were more interested in arousing fear and anxiety, and nothing accomplishes that like someone lying to your face.

"We thought we shouldn't do an origin story," Goyer says. "We should just make him exist, and furthermore, we should make him slippery, with these sort of *Choose Your Own Adventure* origin stories. When we first posed that to Warner Bros., even after the success of *Batman Begins,* they balked: 'How can you do that?' and 'Which one of these is true?' We said, 'You're never going to get the answer.' That's one of the reasons he was truly scary."

The Joker first appeared, without explanation, in the spring of 1940, cutting a path of murder, robbery and mayhem through Gotham City in *Batman No. 1.* The Caped Crusader himself had debuted less than a year earlier, as a masked vigilante in *Detective Comics No. 27.* As the crime fighter's popularity soared, the Joker became a way for creators Bob Kane and Bill Finger to pit their stoic, shadowy hero against a flamboyant, wisecracking foil. Even in their first clash, the Joker manages to draw out Bruce Wayne's sense of humor. "You may be the Joker, but I'm the king of clubs," Batman says, delivering a groaner of a dad joke with a right hook to the Joker's jaw.

We've all crossed paths with his type many times. The greater fear is becoming him.

Eleven years after the character's debut, Finger wrote a backstory in 1951's *Detective Comics No. 168* that identifies the Joker as the Red Hood, a burglar in a tuxedo and a face-concealing crimson dome who is discolored and disfigured after plunging into a vat of chemicals during a failed heist. *The Killing Joke* expanded on Finger's story 37 years later by adding that the Joker had been a struggling stand-up comedian before he became the Red Hood out of financial desperation. The 2014–2015 comics series *Batman: Endgame* proposed an even more eccentric origin, implying that the Joker is a supernatural near-immortal who, like Stephen King's Pennywise in *It,* turns up throughout Gotham's grim history.

Some things stick, some don't.

"Whatever is embraced by fans and readers is what accumulates as canon," Lee says.

In 1989, Tim Burton's *Batman* created yet another new identity for the character, with Jack Nicholson playing mid-level gangster Jack Napier, the triggerman who murdered the Waynes during a mugging. There's no Red Hood, but the movie retains the notion that being mutilated in a chemical bath drove Napier to madness. From there, the cautious Napier becomes a wild man. He indulges. He takes what he wants. He destroys anyone in the way.

"That makes Jack Nicholson's Joker one of the stronger versions we have available," says University of California, Los Angeles clinical psychologist Andrea Letamendi, who explores the psychology behind superhero storytelling on the *Arkham Sessions* podcast. "This is his true nature, and he's found a way to express himself and actualize those inner feelings of chaos and destruction. He's enjoying his life so much."

The Joker's brazen lack of remorse is one source for the disturbing combination of attraction and repulsion that he inspires in us. "We don't feel safe around this person," Letamendi says. "Our natural inclination is to be fearful and avoid him. But that freedom and sense of enjoyment of his experience lures us in."

Call it toxic charisma. From Cesar Romero's amused, alliteration-spouting antagonist on the campy 1960s TV series to Mark Hamill's dastardly and dashing 1990s version on *Batman: The Animated Series,* one of the unifying Joker traits is magnetism.

"This is why Jared Leto fell flat for us," Letamendi says of the so-called Juggalo Joker from 2016's *Suicide Squad.* "The edginess went so far, but he didn't have the charm or appeal. He was supposed to be tatted up and cool, but that's different than genuine charm."

The Joker's flexibility has made him a nearly infinite resource for DC. "He can manifest himself in various forms because he's a modern-day boogeyman," Lee says. "He's beguiling in his own way because he's so over-the-top."

The company is so confident in the Joker's mainstream appeal that, in addition to the new film, it's releasing three comic-book titles about him in October, each featuring a different mythology. Two of them—Kami Garcia's *Joker/Harley: Criminal Sanity,* and John Carpenter and Anthony Burch's *The Joker: Year of the Villain*—drop on the same day, October 9, while Jeff Lemire's *Joker: Killer Smile* hits three weeks later.

Asked why he thinks the Joker provides such rich material for storytellers, Phoenix points to the malevolence in the clown's eyes. "When you don't have a definitive, clear backstory, it allows us to project our ideas on it. And that engages us. The character forces us to examine ourselves and our behavior."

The actor grins, wide and sinister. "Also, son of a bitch—he just looks cool."

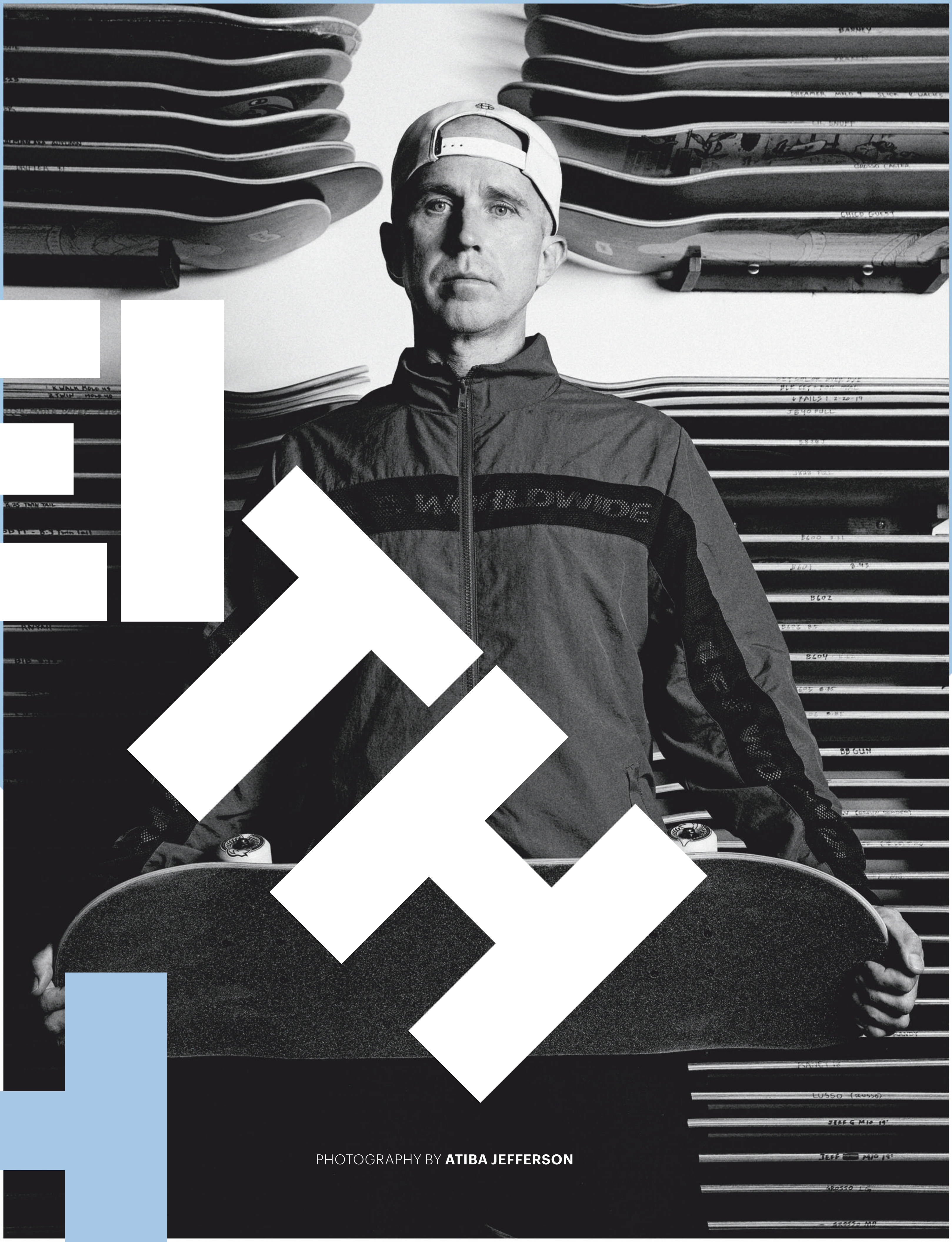
In that reading, the Joker remains fascinating not because he's aberrant but because he's a funhouse mirror. We've all crossed paths with his type many times. The greater fear is not becoming his victim but becoming him. In all his forms, the Joker is someone who has lost his humanity. He feels nothing except selfishness. He can only rid himself of hurt by inflicting it on others. We recognize the mercilessness. We know the narcissism. We sense the misery tearing him to pieces from within.

We could almost feel sorry for the Joker, if only he weren't laughing at us. ■

KEITH

HUFN

Man in His Domain



PHOTOGRAPHY BY **ATIBA JEFFERSON**

BY **YASI SALEK**

NEARLY TWO DECADES AFTER LAUNCHING HUF FROM A MODEST STOREFRONT IN SAN FRANCISCO, THE ACCIDENTAL TASTEMAKER IS USHERING HIS EMPIRE INTO A NEW ERA OF SKATING AND STYLE

It wasn't Keith Hufnagel's idea to name his clothing brand after himself. Anne Freeman, his wife at the time, suggested it when they started the company back in 2002, even pushed for it. Hufnagel had been using his nickname, Huf, on his pro-model skateboard decks for some time, and his sponsors put it on T-shirts. He'd built a personal brand around the name already; it was only a matter of transferring it to his new venture. He felt sort of insecure about it, but he did it anyway. Although they later divorced, Freeman remained involved with the company until 2013, and the name she helped mint remains to this day.

"If you look out in the world, there are tons of brands with people's names on them, and you may not even know who they are. Like, do you know who Louis Vuitton is?" Hufnagel asks me.

I do not, in fact, know who Louis Vuitton is or was, despite owning at least one of his purses, so I get Hufnagel's point. You build a brand, time passes, and you as a person become just one helix in its DNA. Or at least that's the goal. I do know who Keith Hufnagel is, however, and so do a lot of other people—mostly skateboarders and skateboarding fans but streetwear devotees too.

When I first interviewed Hufnagel, back in 2005, HUF was a small clothing line with just two stores in San Francisco, some very limited-edition sneaker collaborations and a lot of buzz. Almost 15 years later, we're at HUF headquarters in downtown L.A., talking in his office, which is filled with clothing patterns and art pieces, including a giant pigeon sculpture by artist-skater and HUF collaborator Todd Francis. Hufnagel is wearing black twill HUF work pants, a white HUF-logo pocket T-shirt and Adidas shell toes.

This is where Hufnagel spends most days. On the floor, leaning against the wall is a large poster for the footwear company Lakai featuring a grinning blond boy carrying a tiny skateboard. "Keenan did some modeling," Hufnagel tells me. His six-year-old son with his current wife, Mariellen, was named after Keenan Milton, a professional skateboarder who passed away in 2001. He was Hufnagel's contemporary and best friend. About a year after Milton's death, Hufnagel started HUF. He was 28 at the time.

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Keith Hufnagel was born in New York City in 1974 to a nurse and a computer technician. He grew up in Stuyvesant Town–Peter Cooper Village, an 80-acre post–World War II residential development bound by First Avenue to the west, 23rd Street to the north and 14th Street to the south. "Everyone in the neighborhood was skateboarding," he tells me. "This group of kids used to hang out at Midtown Plaza, and they would skate in those little dead-end streets. We'd all ride, and I learned how to ollie. Then, for my 13th birthday, I got a real professional-style skateboard."

From that day on, Hufnagel never stopped skateboarding. "It was a passion, or it was an addiction, whatever you want to call it," he says. "It was my path." Skateboarding was an entry point into a new community, into new geography. "The whole thing is social, because you're meeting people and staying connected with them and going to skate their areas. I met Chris Keeffe in my area and then went out to Woodside, Queens and skated his area. Then I met Jon Buscemi and Gino Iannucci and went out to Long Island and hung with them. And then there's Mike Hernandez in the Bronx and Ryan Hickey in Brooklyn, and all of a sudden New York is no longer this small little city."

New York in the early 1990s is a time of myth. Hufnagel's scene included skaters who would become big names, such as Iannucci and Hickey, but also Brian Donnelly, the artist now known as KAWS, and filmmaker Harmony Korine, who immortalized the world of Hufnagel's high school years with his screenplay for the 1995 film *Kids,* which featured other members of the scene: Justin Pierce, Leo Fitzpatrick and, most famously, Chloë Sevigny.

In 1992 Hufnagel packed up and moved to San Francisco, ostensibly to attend college but more to pursue skateboarding. "I saw California as the mecca for skateboarding," he says, "and at that time San Francisco had the biggest scene. It was where all the footage was coming from."

If New York is where Hufnagel found his passion, San Francisco is where he made that passion a profession. He turned pro halfway through his freshman year, joining a company called Fun Skateboards. He was skating all the time and traveling to film in Europe and Japan. Soon he had to make a choice. He chose his passion. He dropped out of school and kept skateboarding.

I ask him what "going pro" entails. "First you have to understand there are no actual rules in skateboarding," he says. "If someone says you're pro, you're pro, which means your name goes on a skateboard and you get paid a royalty. You basically become your own brand." When Fun Skateboards folded in 1994, Hufnagel was picked up by Real. For the next eight years, he built his brand. He moved to L.A., then back to San Francisco, kept traveling the world, kept living his dream.

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Historically, skateboarding has been a sport fundamentally about pleasure. Skateboarding is about freedom, adrenaline, creativity. Art has always played a crucial role: Most skate decks have boundary-pushing graphics designed by fringe and underground artists. Music too: Ask people from a certain generation how they discovered their favorite bands, and a common answer will be that they found them through skate videos. A lot of skateboarders became artists, musicians or filmmakers. Skateboarding is a social organizer: You skate with your friends and hang out with other skaters. Skateboarding is a party. "You can go to a place, drink beer, skate all night," Hufnagel says. "You can drink and smoke till four or five in the morning, pass out, wake up at four in the afternoon and do the same thing. Something I always thought about is, How am I gonna keep the party going?" It was this question that planted the seed for HUF.

"When you go 10 years deep into skateboarding, you realize at some point that you can't do this forever," Hufnagel says. "I can skateboard forever, but I can't travel the world and be at a professional level forever." He pauses. "I think you just want change too."

And so Hufnagel began to think about change. In his travels he'd been exposed to the street culture in Japan and Europe. Sneaker collecting was becoming a big deal the world over. And Hufnagel was into all of it—the sneakers, the street art and, most of all, the clothing. He wore pieces from Supreme, Japanese brand Mad Hectic and Stüssy, which sponsored him. Off the board he wore limited-edition Nike Air Maxes. "People were just trading and finding out where things were," he says. "This culture was really brewing."

He wouldn't say it himself, but Hufnagel has always been

Opening page: Hufnagel returns to his roots at Deluxe Distribution, where Real Skateboards is headquartered. "This is the spot where everyone used to meet, hang out, set up boards, talk shit," he says. **Left and below:** Bay Blocks, an iconic San Francisco skate spot and a favorite of Hufnagel's. **Middle left:** A skate down memory lane. "Powell Street was right down the street from the first HUF store, so I was always hanging out around here," Hufnagel says.

POWELL & HYDE STS.
24
SAN FRANCISCO MUNICIPAL RAILWAY
Powell

Skateboarding is about freedom, adrenaline, creativity.

defined by his style. He stood out as a skateboarder because of his powerful, fast and graceful physicality. To a lesser extent, he was known for his aesthetics. "He just dressed kind of fresh," former HUF creative director Hanni El Khatib says. "When people think of him as a skateboarder, they definitely think of his style." Hufnagel was so into clothing that in the late 1990s he did a six-month stint at the Fashion Institute of Technology, taking classes in design and pattern making.

And so HUF was born in a narrow side room in Hufnagel's apartment in San Francisco. At the time, Hufnagel was at the height of his skateboarding career, still riding for Real and landing ollies higher than heaven. He and Freeman opened the first HUF store on Sutter Street as a sort of marketplace for all the things he'd discovered and coveted on his travels. They mainly carried sneakers, and because of Hufnagel's connections they often had the rarest limited-edition Nikes. They also offered clothing from Supreme, P.A.M., Stüssy and Mad Hectic, as well as skate decks and KAWS figurines. And from day one, they made their own T-shirts, with big HUF logos on them.

T-shirts led to an entire line of clothing that was immediately popular with industry tastemakers. But it was their Plantlife socks—athletic socks with an all-over pot-leaf print, designed by El Khatib—that reached a broader audience. They were created half-jokingly as a conversation starter to get girls at parties. (Hufnagel doesn't really smoke weed.) But they took off after members of the rap group Odd Future, who frequented the brand's first L.A. store, started wearing them; the socks became one of the best-selling items in HUF history.

Artist collaborations were an early and enduring part of the brand. Barry McGee, Cleon Peterson, Chloé Kovska and other artists have all done their first clothing designs with HUF. I ask Kovska what HUF offered that interested her. "The freedom to breathe," she replies. "They didn't have a problem with risqué imagery, weed or nudity. I could just be myself with them. Nothing was a bad idea."

HUF's aesthetic crystallized early on. Ultimately, it's rooted in the founder himself: his history, his tastes, his reputation—and his undying love of skateboarding. HUF is not a core skate brand, but it's not purely a streetwear brand either. Skateboarding anchors it. Hufnagel wants HUF to have a skate team no matter what. He wants skaters to wear HUF clothes. "Our roots come from skateboarding, so we're always going to support skateboarding, one way or another," he says. "We're going to have a team, we're going to do tours, we're going to put people in the clothes, we're going to embrace who they are and help them excel in skateboarding."

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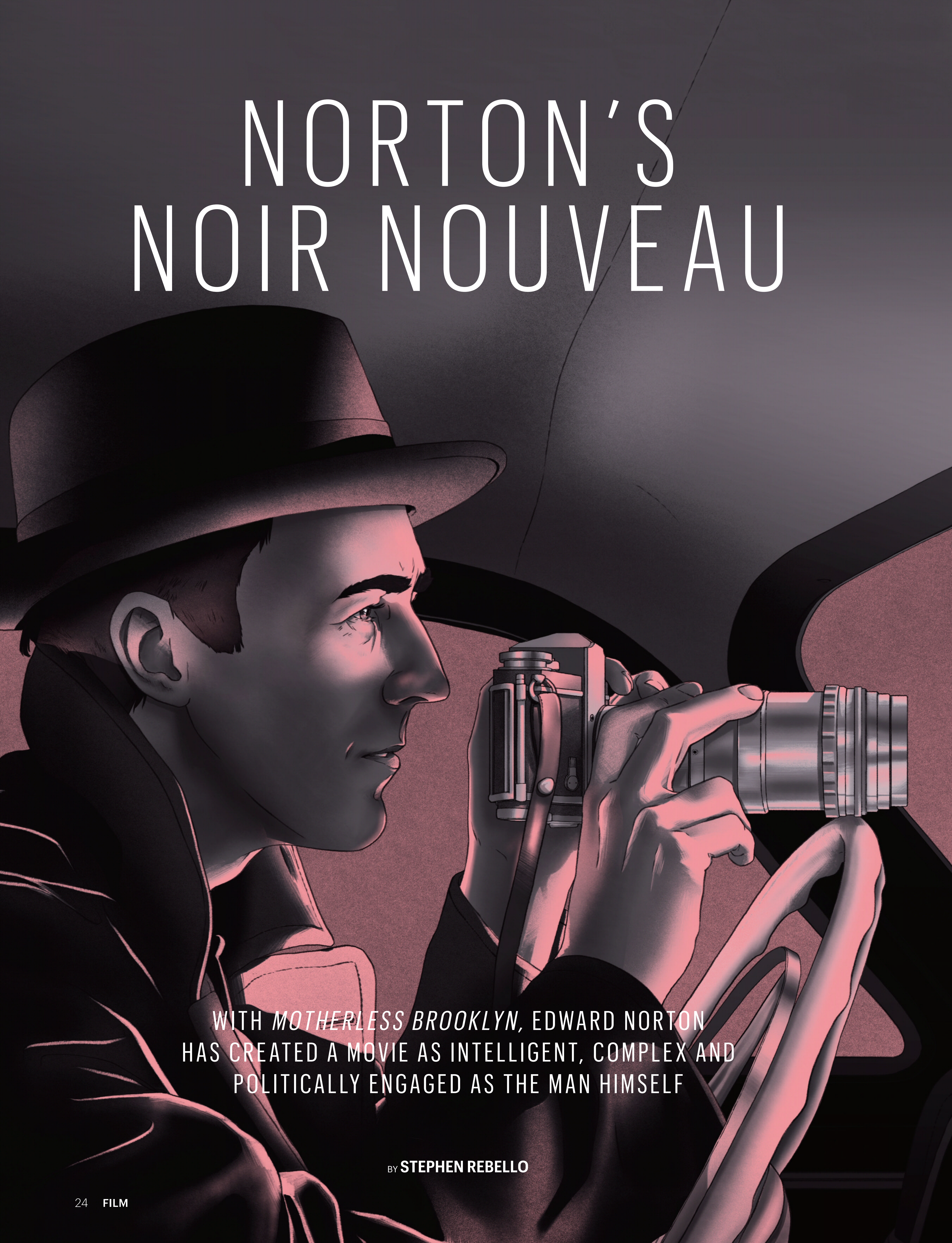
In the past 17 years, HUF has gone from a company with a few T-shirt designs to a globally recognized streetwear brand. There are 13 HUF stores, and the company's signature wares are carried in 59 countries. After a 2018 womenswear soft launch, there are plans to widely release the line to reflect the significant presence of women in the sport. Although HUF's growth has included several sets of outside investors (it's currently majority owned by Japanese company TSI Holdings, which is also the parent company of Lakai), Hufnagel has stayed on in varying capacities the entire time. His current title is chief creative officer, and he goes to the office every day.

With the sport of skateboarding changing so much in the past two decades, has Hufnagel ever struggled to stay true to his roots? No, he says, because he doesn't think the skateboarding mind-set ever truly changed. "We don't care what people think," he says. "We're gonna do this because we love it. It creates a culture. The kids involved in it are fresh; they're creating new fashion styles. Kids who are skateboarders are walking down runways for Louis Vuitton. That's pretty fucking amazing."

At first I thought Hufnagel's main motivation was to protect his legacy—the Louis Vuitton–ification of his name. But by all accounts, he has little ego. The more I talk to him, the clearer it becomes that what really keeps him showing up day after day is something else entirely. It's to protect, to be the caretaker of the skateboarding ethos. He doesn't view this as an obligation but as a privilege. Skateboarding gave him friends; it gave him a career, the opportunity to travel, a purpose, a name. "Now I'm in the business of apparel and watching skateboarders grow," he says. "I've continued the same path, but I've just changed positions. I never had to leave skateboarding."

At the age of 45, Hufnagel may not be drinking beers till four A.M. or landing huge tricks, but he's definitely still at the party. He still skateboards every day. "I'm not throwing myself down stairs, but I still have fun going out and just basically skating three blocks and getting a coffee," he says. Is it still as much fun as it was when he was a teenager? He nods. "It's freedom. Freedom to roll fast, to get around easy. I mean, you can grab a fucking Bird scooter and do that, but you may not look that cool." ■

NORTON'S NOIR NOUVEAU



WITH *MOTHERLESS BROOKLYN,* EDWARD NORTON HAS CREATED A MOVIE AS INTELLIGENT, COMPLEX AND POLITICALLY ENGAGED AS THE MAN HIMSELF

BY **STEPHEN REBELLO**

The thing about Edward Norton is he was never really here—or so it seemed. Sure, as a 26-year-old in his first big movie, 1996's *Primal Fear,* his hair-raising performance as a possibly homicidal altar boy nabbed him an Oscar nomination. Critics and moviegoers started asking, between breathless comparisons to everyone from DiCaprio to Hoffman, *Who is this guy?*

But as vivid as he could be on-screen, offscreen Norton ghosted us all. Letting the work tell the story, he made a shell game out of his dealings with the press, shunning interviews and ducking questions about his personal life—especially when he bulked up by 30 pounds and scored a best actor Oscar nomination for his gut-wrenching neo-Nazi turn in 1998's *American History X.*

Through the aughts, Norton continued to protect his off-camera life while keeping his screen profile high, if unclassifiable. He mostly avoided Hollywood cash grabs, gravitating instead to a range of complex roles: a pornographer's soft-spoken lawyer, a feckless drug dealer, a bipolar dude with a latent flair for violence, a green superhero with rage issues and an egomaniacal actor—for, respectively, cream-of-the-crop directors Miloš Forman (*The People vs. Larry Flynt*), Spike Lee (*25th Hour*), David Fincher (*Fight Club*), Louis Leterrier (*The Incredible Hulk*) and Alejandro G. Iñárritu (*Birdman;* yet another Oscar nomination).

By then a certain reputation had emerged, one fed by Norton's widely publicized head-on collisions with the directors of *American History X* and *Red Dragon* and the battles with Marvel that likely factored into Mark Ruffalo taking over as the Hulk. One common denominator: By many accounts, if Norton thought a script needed an overhaul, he'd doctor it himself and try to persuade the director to get onboard.

Then he went relatively quiet, aside from supporting turns in *The Grand Budapest Hotel* and *Collateral Beauty,* and voice stints in *Sausage Party* (he helped Seth Rogen get that one made) and *Isle of Dogs.* Was Norton staging a vanishing act? Had he become one of those actors, per endless online speculation, that *Hollywood won't hire?*

Not so fast. Aside from being busy as a husband (to movie producer Shauna Robertson), the father of a now six-year-old son, a scuba diver and pilot, a tireless environmental advocate, a trustee of an affordable-housing nonprofit and a producer on more than a dozen documentaries and feature films (including last year's *Gotti*), Norton has been quietly preparing to step back into the spotlight.

The $26 million movie *Motherless Brooklyn,* in wide release this November, revolves around his performance as Lionel Essrog—a sad, solitary private detective with Tourette syndrome who struggles to make sense of a morally and politically rancid world following the murder of his mobbed-up mentor (Bruce Willis). Watching the gritty yet open-heartedly romantic movie, which Norton also directed, produced and adapted from Jonathan Lethem's 1999 novel, you can almost feel the man stepping out and showing us what matters to him, what's eating at him, what he thinks of the state of things in America in 2019. *So that's who Edward Norton is.*

Speaking almost as rapidly and obsessively as his gumshoe protagonist, Norton describes his near 20-year campaign to launch the movie, whose knockout cast includes Alec Baldwin, Willem Dafoe, Bobby Cannavale, Gugu Mbatha-Raw (pictured above with Norton in a scene from the film), Michael K. Williams and Leslie Mann. "My emotional connection to the book was this character who lets you know from the beginning, 'I've got something wrong with my head,' " he says. "You almost instinctively feel aligned with him from square one, because you're inside his brain and you feel how fucked-up and chaotic his condition is. You can hear from deep down inside that he's not, as people call him, a 'freak show' but a smart, sensitive soul. In many ways, he's in the best tradition of afflicted underdog heroes, like in *Rain Man, Forrest Gump, A Beautiful Mind, Good Will Hunting.* We connect with our better selves by cheering for them."

While Lethem set his novel in contemporary New York, Norton's script throws things back to paranoid, bigoted urban life in the 1950s, pitting his hero against a set of social attitudes, prejudices and politically powerful monsters that, in the dark shadow of current events, seem all too apt. "I wanted to do a serious noir," he explains, "not the clichéd, glossy, Americanized dime-store version—a movie that said, 'Look, there's a lot of skeevy shit going on, a lot of stuff churning underneath the surface, and we ignore it at our peril.' I mean, it isn't coincidental that *Chinatown* arrived on the cusp of Watergate, the end of the Vietnam war and after its director's wife had been murdered by Manson followers. I set this movie in a 1950s New York that was beyond crime, when things were being done at a level so antagonistic to what we think of as 'America' that the city was under the almost autocratic, imperial rule of a Darth Vader who exerted his will on everything."

As perfectionistic and self-critical as Norton can be about his work behind and before the camera (of this project he admits, "I have a sort of creeping contentment about it"), he's effusive when it comes to his collaborators—including his aforementioned Darth Vader, played by Baldwin.

"Alec has such a unique combination of charm and terrible power to intimidate," Norton says. "I wrote quite an aria for him, a celebration of brute power. And when he dug down and delivered that monologue in which his character talks about how, if he wanted to do it with a 'colored girl' in a hotel room, then *pow,* he was going to do it as his right and privilege, he was lethal. I saw the crew's jaws hit the floor."

Cast as the movie's most abusive power broker, Baldwin conjures the toxic essence of the influential predators and racists currently making headlines. Therein may lie the key to Norton's elusive, undeniable genius.

"The best feeling," he says, "is when it resonates like a tuning fork with the times we live in." ■

ILLUSTRATION BY **SARAH MAXWELL**

my pleasure

IF PLEASURE IS LESS POWERFUL THAN PAIN (SPOILER: IT IS), THEN HOW DO WE MAKE LIFE WORTH LIVING?

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
NICK RASMUSSEN

BY **ADAM CONOVER**

Pleasure sucks.

I can hear you now: "Adam, you're writing in PLAYBOY, America's foremost publication dedicated to pleasure. Are you seriously going to argue that pleasure, the very feeling that makes life worth living, 'sucks'?"

Yes, I am. Sorry, you velvet-clad sybarites. Pleasure isn't all that great, and the idea that it makes life worth living doesn't stand up to the barest scrutiny.

The problem is that pain is a *lot* more powerful than pleasure. The South African antinatalist philosopher David Benatar points out this fundamental asymmetry: "The worst pains are worse than the best pleasures are good. If you deny this, consider whether you would accept an hour of the worst tortures in exchange for an hour of the most delightful pleasures."

Okay, I'll bite: Would I, in exchange for one hour of supremely satisfying intercourse with a sexually and emotionally fulfilling partner of my choosing, agree to be waterboarded for one hour while a demon slowly peels off my toenails with a pair of red-hot pliers, a stinging jellyfish gives me a titty twister and an Amazonian candiru fish swims up my penis?

Don't know about you—I'll pass.

Because pain traumatizes and injures, its effects linger long after it's felt. Pleasure, on the other hand, is fleeting. As soon as it arises, it's gone.

If I may offer a personal example: As I write this, I'm sitting next to a pool at a hotel in Phoenix. The sun is warm, the wind is blowing, and I have a cold beverage in my hand. If anything is pleasurable, it's this! But tomorrow, I have to get up at four A.M., go to the airport and fly coach, with a layover, to Montreal. It doesn't matter how lovely it feels to dip my piggies in the pool today; tomorrow's going to suck. Once again, pain has the upper hand.

Even if we were somehow able to craft lives for ourselves in which we felt pleasure every waking moment—and in America in 2019, this seems to be the goal of an awful lot of people—we would still never be content. "Sure, this is nice," I think, sitting by the pool, the breeze ruffling my hair, "but wouldn't it be even nicer if it were a few degrees cooler, and if I looked better with my shirt off, and if those kids from Ohio weren't hogging the hot tub? I wish I were richer so I could start my own hotel and ban kids forever! *That* would be the life!" And on and on. Pleasure feels nice, but it never truly makes us happy.

Finally, let's not forget that our pleasure often comes at the expense of another's pain: That fat cat up in first class may be enjoying his lie-flat seat, but is it worth it when its existence means those of us in back are all the more cramped and miserable?

The truth is, pleasure is not a goal worth striving for. So what, instead, should we seek? I would argue that the answer is *satisfaction.* Satisfaction isn't a fleeting sense of joy or titillation; it's a feeling of abiding comfort, of being free from desire. And it can be achieved not just by improving our own lives but by helping those around us. What's more satisfying than knowing you've done good in the world? And while pleasure is often expensive, satisfaction has no price tag and is available to everyone.

Of course, once you're satisfied, if you have the opportunity to experience pleasure every now and again—knock yourself out! Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to go engage in emotionally fulfilling intercourse with the partner of my choice. ■

BEFORE I LEARNED THE MYSTERIES OF SELF-PLEASURE, I HAD TO ACCEPT THAT I DESERVED TO FEEL GOOD

BY **MIEL BREDOUW**

"I heard Amanda lies under the bathtub faucet."

I was tucked into my locker after seventh-grade gym, wrangling my sweaty sports bra out from beneath the underwire bra on top of it. I designed this technique so no one could see my nipples. Eavesdropping on my classmates was an unexpected bonus.

"*What?*"

"Like...spread-eagle."

"Why doesn't she use the hand-shower thing?"

"She doesn't have one."

I might have screamed, "*That's not how you're supposed to take a shower,*" if I hadn't been stuck in a two-bra shibari of my own design. Or maybe, "*Is she pregnant with water?*" But I never would have dared ask the only question I actually needed answered: Why?

I wasn't religious. I wasn't even wholesome. I was the one who knew what a blow job was (or, as I learned it, a "blow joe"). I was the one who got in trouble for "swearing like a sailor." I was even the one who proudly told the entire lunch table that I was "pretty sure the applicator thing stays on the outside."

But masturbation? *Whom???*

Slowly, I figured out it was like rubbing that genie lamp inside a cave, except the cave is hip-huggers and also there's no genie. I felt contaminated for even thinking about it. How could it possibly feel good enough to offset the *humiliating* means of getting there, the *cringe-worthy* noises and *grotesque* expressions I might make, the *devastating* judgment if I was ever found out or how *grody* I'd *definitely* feel afterward? But above all was the insidious thought that had haunted me so long it nearly became me:

Who ever said I deserved to feel good?

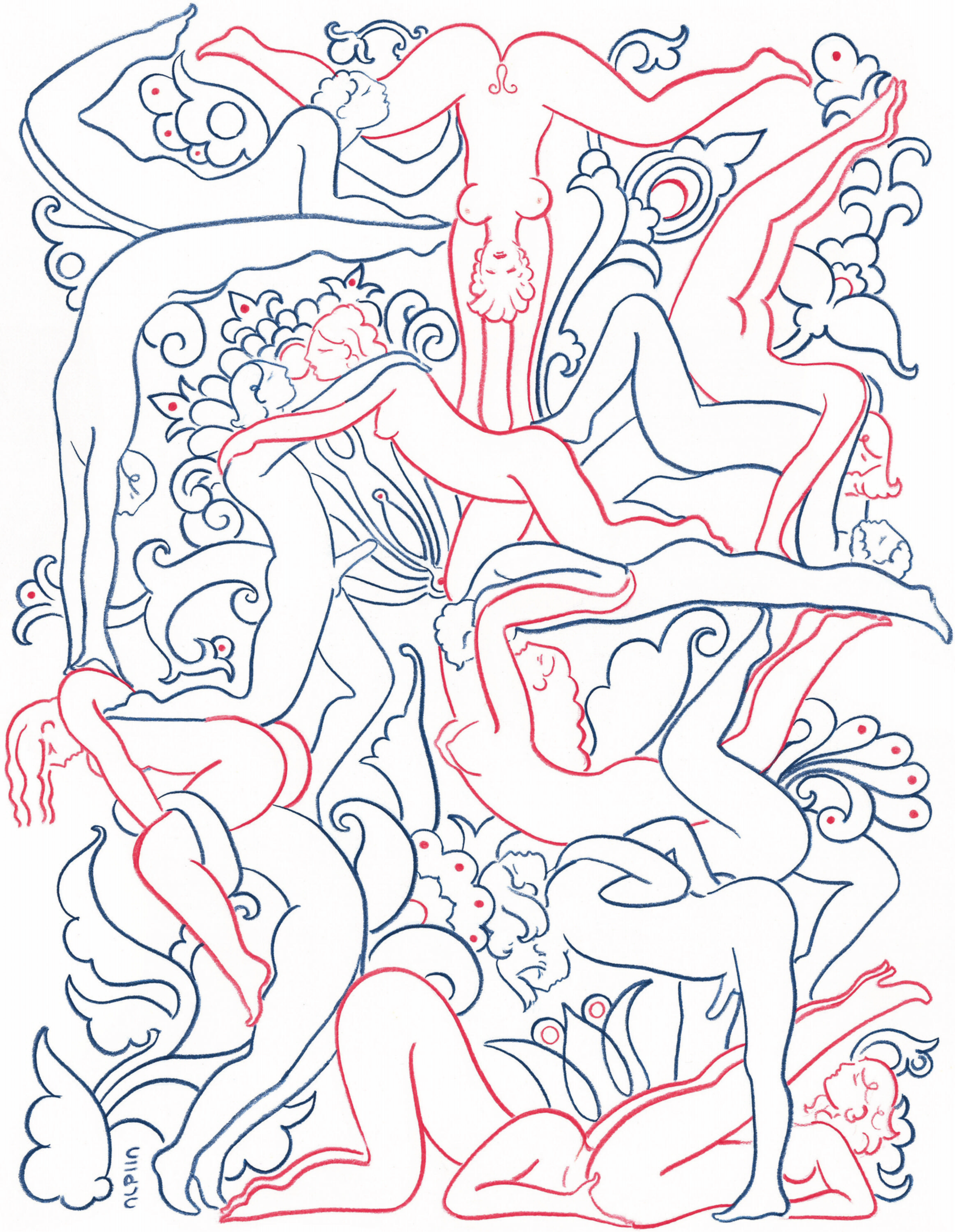
Maybe I would have felt differently if I'd had a lock on my bedroom door. If I had liked my body. If I had gone to a school with better sex ed. If I possessed even one crumb of self-esteem. If I had become friends with Amanda, or any girl for that matter. If I could have seen *Big Mouth* or *Pen15* or *Booksmart* or any content that normalizes girls pleasuring themselves, for themselves. But I didn't. And so I learned pleasure as something meant for other people.

Shame followed me into high school like the rolling backpack my chiropractor begged me to use. I didn't know it as "shame" then, just as "the truth." I did start dabbling in sexual activity with other people, but I justified it to myself on the grounds that *they* wanted it. I prided myself on being "chill" and "low maintenance" and "so down-to-earth, I'm basically in hell." But me... horny? *Ha ha ha honestly that's really funny because it's medically impossible for me to be horny my doctor told me and you can ask them except like patient confidentiality and actually who told you I was horny because THAT ONE TIME at the assembly when I yelled "Schwing!" I was doing a very funny bit.*

I was so committed to being unburdened by libido that I maintained it for years, without question. I became *The Adult Girl Who Had Never Masturbated* (R.I.P. Stieg Larsson). I even started joking about it—something about my small hands, as if a lack of meaty thumbs and an octave reach exempted me from the bean-flicking draft.

I wish I could say that, one day, some sexy spirit moved me to put on "I'm Every Woman" and finger-blast myself into sensual oblivion. The reality is slightly less empowering: A supportive boyfriend surprised me with a vibrator. Not for him, not for us, just for me. I guffawed, "In what world? I hope they take returns! Why is it so smooth?" But then, in a quiet moment when no one was home, I locked the door, turned off the lights, lit a candle and gave it a try. And all at once, I understood why Amanda had lain spread-eagle beneath the bathtub faucet.

She figured it out at 12. I was twenty-fucking-four. ■



ARTWORKS BY **ALPHACHANNELING**

PLAYBOY
ADVISOR

Dr. Chris Donaghue—certified sex therapist, director of clinical education for the Sexual Health Alliance and host of *Loveline*—takes on the role of Playboy Advisor and weighs in on readers' questions about oral sex, orgasm-less sex, amateur sex, sweaty sex, forbidden sex, interracial sex and more

Q: *I love cunnilingus. I can go down on a woman for hours. My favorite sex position is using my tongue to make a woman come while getting myself off. And the woman almost always comes! This means I rarely have penetrative sex, as I am just fine coming without it. A woman I recently started dating tells me it's strange that masturbation gets me off better than her vagina. Should I be worried that I, a straight man, am not that into vaginal sex?—B.K., Colorado Springs, Colorado*

A: The first thing to note is that her vagina is still getting you off. Rest assured that there's nothing "strange" about preferring masturbation over penetration, because there is no "correct" way to have sex. The goal of sex isn't penetration; it's achieving mutual pleasure. You deserve to feel confident and authentic in whatever helps you do that.

Further, your heterosexuality should not inform anything about your sex life other than the gender of your sexual partner (though even that is fluid nowadays). Being straight does not predetermine one's favored sex positions, nor should it restrict them. Your heterosexuality also isn't an excuse for anyone to shame you.

Yes, calling someone's sexual preferences "strange" amounts to a form of shaming, which can quickly turn abusive. Your concern should be about other nontraditional interests your girlfriend might pass judgment on. When we reveal our sexual interests to a lover, the response should be one of acceptance—as long as those interests are mindful of your partner's pleasure and cause no harm to others. Which is why I must ask: Is your partner dissatisfied with receiving only oral sex? Has she asked you to do more than go down on her? Have you refused? If so, it's your duty to incorporate more penetration so *both* your desires are being fulfilled. This doesn't mean giving up what you like. Introducing a vibrator, for example, leaves one hand free for masturbation while still giving your tongue access to her clitoris.

If she has expressed that oral sex alone satisfies her, you need to tell her how her words make you feel (i.e., inadequate). Our self-worth is an accumulation of how others treat us, but you are responsible for your self-esteem. Human interactions, especially sex, are never neutral. You will always leave a sexual encounter either feeling better about yourself, your body and sex in general—or feeling bad about it all. Choose the former.

Q: *Why has adultery become so prevalent? I've witnessed three of my friends cheating—separately, though all three did it publicly and in front of me. I'm close with their partners, so their infidelities have complicated our friendships. This has made me quite cynical about dating and relationships. Overall, I don't know how to handle what I've seen. Do I call them out, tell their partners or shut my mouth and toss out my moral compass?—M.F., Overland Park, Kansas*

A: Simple answer: Adultery is prevalent because monogamy is hard. According to data collected by the General Social Survey from 2010 to 2016, as many as one in five men have cheated on their spouses. Comparatively, 13 percent of women have cheated on their spouses. Those figures increase as people get older, however, suggesting that monogamy becomes more difficult with age. Meanwhile, the definition of *cheating* continues to evolve. According to the 2019 Playboy Sex Survey, 17 percent of female respondents did not consider sexual intercourse "a form of cheating."

The core issue driving people to cheat is not just the tension between desiring commitment and wanting the freedom to explore but also the toxic rules that govern many monogamous relationships. Toxic monogamy is the idea that you have a right to own or control your partner. This includes viewing others of the same gender as threats and not respecting your partner's privacy. (How many readers have broken into their lovers' cell phones?) Such behavior sucks the joy and sustainability out of any relationship.

Cheating is an unacceptable solution for whatever issues your friends may be trying to solve (or run from). It robs a relationship of trust, which is difficult to get back. Most of us could benefit from being honest with our partners about our needs, and that includes a desire to have sex with others while in an exclusive relationship. Deciding to do so without telling a partner is nothing short of destructive.

But let's switch back to you, the innocent bystander. I suggest speaking to each of your cheating friends individually so you can better understand their relationships. Not everyone has the same rules, and it's increasingly common for couples to enter monogamy with different expectations and dynamics. Some couples are fully open, some allow for

Orgasms are hot and fun, but they aren't guaranteed, nor should they be required. The goal isn't mutual orgasm but mutual pleasure. By expanding our definition of what we call "sex," we can create new sexual connections and new kinks.

casual make-outs and drunk flirting, and the majority are traditional and closed. Might all three of your friends be in open relationships? It's unlikely—only one in 10 people ages 25 to 34 are—but...perhaps.

While it is not your job to fix anyone's relationship (or destroy it), you should confront your friends about how they've put you in an unfair position. In the end, being a moral friend doesn't make you the moral police. If they turn on you or respond with anger, you have no reason to stay faithful to them—something they should know a thing or two about.

Q: *My husband and I have been married for 14 years. We enjoy a physically intense sex life that includes verbal degradation and sex that leaves us both bruised. We've never taken it to the point where either of us feels unsafe; only once have my bruises been large enough that I've had to cover them. I recently started bingeing HBO's Big Little Lies, and on the show, Nicole Kidman and Alexander Skarsgård's characters engage in similar sexual behavior—though the balance of power in their sex life seems less equitable. The Kidman character's therapist says she may be addicted to the pain. I never thought such a thing was possible. Is it? Could my husband and I be addicted to pain during sex?—D.B., Santa Monica, California*
A: You shouldn't retroactively pathologize 14 years of a healthy sex life because of a fictitious plotline on a soapy TV show. For one, you cannot be "addicted" to pain. You can seek pain, enjoy it and prefer sex with it, but you cannot be addicted to it.

Our culture likes to dramatize extreme interests by deeming them "addictions." Diverse and subversive sexual acts create anxiety among sex-phobic social puritans. Understand that the purpose of a phrase like *sex addiction,* which the American Psychiatric Association rejects, is to diagnose someone's sex life as abnormal. There's nothing psychologically wrong with intensely—or even painfully—experiencing your sexuality, as long as it's safe, consensual and with someone you trust. I work with many patients who strive to heighten their arousal, expand their sex lives and find true compatibility. You and your husband seem to have achieved all that—to which I say congratulations.

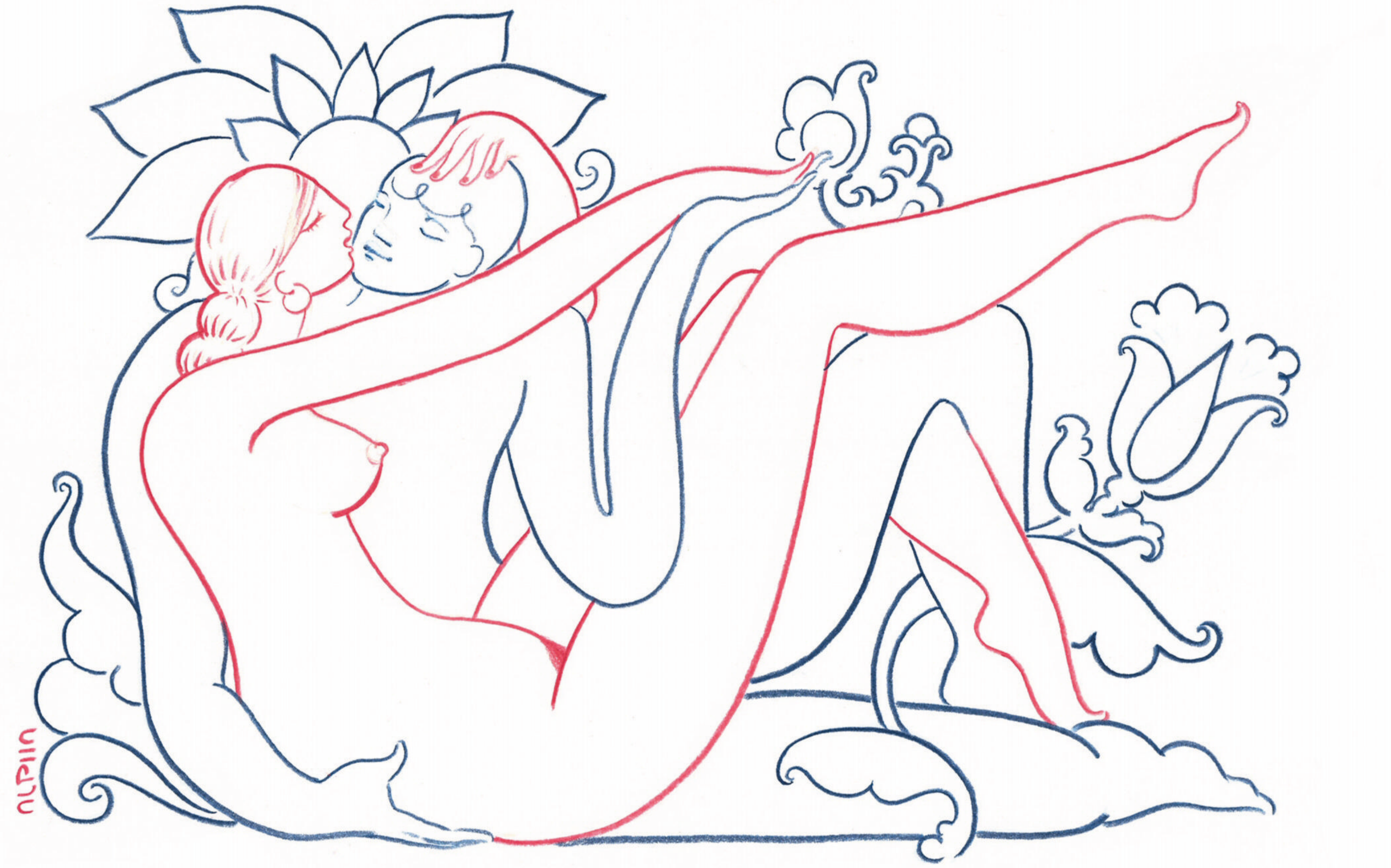
Q: *I'm a white man who has dated only chunky women of color. No one has ever commented on the similarities between my exes, but today's climate has made me hyper-aware of body shaming, misogyny and racism. Is it possible I have some underlying, unhealthy attraction to women of a particular race and body type that I'm not fully aware of?—A.P., Detroit, Michigan*
A: If I were to read your question a different way, it may sound as though you're covertly asking whether you, a white man, should sleep only with thin white women. The answer to that is an obvious no.

It's refreshing how aware you are that your sexuality can impact others in ways you may not fully realize. To me, this speaks to your compassion. Having compassion for people who come from different backgrounds is a goal of intersectionality. Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 and defined as "the complex, cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination (such as racism, sexism and classism) combine, overlap or intersect especially in the experiences of marginalized individuals or groups," intersectionality aims to increase awareness of the power imbalances in all areas of life. That includes our sex lives.

Fetishization is the process of reducing a person to certain physical attributes and ignoring everything else about them. Thus, fetishizing larger women or women of color is indeed a problem. But I don't believe you exhibit this fetish, as your relationships with these women have all gone beyond sex. They're not sex objects; they're your partners.

It's important to be conscious of how you use your privilege and social power, but there's no politically correct form of sexual desire. Don't overthink what turns you on, and don't resist what arouses you because of identity politics. In the U.S., healthy interracial relationships have long represented two people pushing back against societal inequality. As long as you treat the women in your life like the gorgeous, intelligent, autonomous sexual beings they are, you have nothing to be concerned about.

Q: *My sister's boyfriend recently relocated from Chicago, where they were living together, to Boston, where I live, for work. As a straight woman, I find him immensely attractive and have had many sex dreams about him throughout their relationship. Now that we live in the same city, he constantly texts me to hang out. I don't trust myself around him and have gone to great lengths to avoid contact. My sister wants to know why I won't help her boyfriend settle in. It's actually causing me a lot of stress. What do I do?—K.H., Boston, Massachusetts*
A: Why do you think you wouldn't be able to control your impulses if the two of you were to spend time together? I suspect you're harboring some hope of a future in which you two end up together. Sorry, but he isn't interested in having sex with you. He just wants to spend time with someone he knows in an unfamiliar city.



Your anxiety is par for the course in cases of unrequited love, but don't lose yourself in a world of what-ifs. Boston is home to many single men you could date. Don't waste your time obsessing over your sister's boyfriend, who is unavailable, as if he's your only option. He isn't.

In the meantime, make this man—a person your sister loves deeply—feel at home without becoming a home-wrecker. There are many easy ways to make this work. Socialize in public or do group activities. Don't spend time alone with each other, and don't get intoxicated together. Avoiding him isn't sustainable; should they wed, you'll be running from him till death do they part.

Q: *I'm a virgin, but I want to start having sex soon. How am I supposed to know which condom is right for me? I'm average length but thick in girth. I'm also uncircumcised. I don't want a condom to ruin the mood when it finally happens.—J.G., Goodyear, Arizona*

A: Condom selection, like everything else tied to sex, is trial and error. Determining your condom size is not only important for your (and his/her) pleasure but integral to effective birth control, STI prevention and a healthy sex life. Sizing charts can be found online, but beware: The charts aren't standard across manufacturers. Condoms are also made from different materials, such as latex, polyisoprene and polyurethane. Some feature studs, ribbing and prelubricant. Some are colored, others are flavored. All of this is to say finding the right condom goes beyond fit.

Start by investing in a few brands and various styles. Many brands come in packs of one to three and can be purchased online. Try one on and wear it while masturbating to kick-start your body into linking protection with arousal. Your first time will be awkward for a lot of unforeseeable reasons, but I can assure you that the person you take to bed will be impressed you came prepared. Oh, and asking your bedfellow to put the condom on you turns a potentially awkward moment into foreplay.

Q: *I play in a rugby league, which requires me to wear a cup. My girlfriend loves it. When I come home from a match, she tears off my uniform and asks me to fuck her while wearing my sweaty jockstrap. But pulling the cloth pouch to the side is distracting, and I can't stay hard. This has left us both frustrated by our spontaneous postgame sex sessions because neither of us finishes. What's behind my girlfriend's fetish for my dirty jockstrap, and how can I fulfill her fantasy even when my body isn't responding?—R.T., Birmingham, U.K.*

A: First off, congrats on having an assertive, sexually empowered girlfriend. A confident partner who *demands* sex? You're luckier than you may realize. Second, your question is a perfect example of how sex helps us grow and mature, because what you view as problems—an inability to stay hard, an inability to climax—are opportunities to remind you what makes sex so great.

To start, nothing is wrong with your body. Orgasms are hot and fun, but they aren't guaranteed, nor should they be required for sex between two people to feel complete. Sex is supposed to be fun, and you don't need to finish to have fun. Fulfill her fantasy by fucking her while wearing the jockstrap. If you go soft, start using your tongue or your fingers, or bring in a toy. Put the jockstrap on her face, switch up positions, ask her to ride you or have her go down on you to bring back your erection.

The goal here isn't mutual orgasm but mutual pleasure. By expanding our definition of what we call "sex," we can create new sexual connections and new kinks.

By the way, the science behind fetishes is a theoretical guessing game, as fetishes represent a complex intersection of brain activity, cultural conditioning and personal experience. Don't sweat about what's behind a fetish (as long as it's not the identity-based variety I mentioned earlier). Just enjoy what comes next—even if you don't. ■

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PLAYBOY INTERVIEW: JEREMY O. HARRIS

A candid conversation with the author of the Broadway-bound Slave Play on the challenges—and pleasures—of bringing black stories to white spaces

With the announcement that his critically acclaimed and controversial *Slave Play* would open on Broadway in October, playwright Jeremy O. Harris tweeted that 10,000 tickets would go on sale at the drastically reduced price of $39. Two things were clear: Harris intended to bring new audiences to the appropriately named Great White Way, and he had little interest in playing by the rules of literary theater, onstage or off. Add to this the fact that his first movie credit—*Zola,* based on a viral Twitter thread, produced by A24 and starring Riley Keough—is in postproduction, and you get the sense that Harris's voice is one we ignore at our peril.

Play is the important word in *Slave Play:* It acts as a verb, hinting at the performative demands of race, gender and sexual identity. The piece stunned sold-out audiences last winter at New York Theatre Workshop, following a student production at the Yale School of Drama, from which Harris, now 30, graduated this year. During the show's previous runs Harris liked to sit in the house and guess who would leave during the first act—five disorienting and sexually explicit scenes between interracial couples that appear to take place on an antebellum plantation. He would watch the audience (including the white people filling most of the seats) watch itself, nervously checking for cues: Laugh? Cringe? Walk out?

For the off-Broadway run, a mirror spanning the back wall literally placed the audience's reflection onstage. In the first few minutes of the play, as a young black actress wearing slave garb twerks before a white man wielding a whip, spectators didn't have to crane their necks in order to gauge their neighbors' reactions; they needed only to watch their reflections. (The set could also be viewed as the digital town square, where we constantly check other people's thoughts before trotting out our own, simultaneously judging others and ourselves.) As the first act reached its denouement, the audience would realize, with a combination of gasps and sighs of relief, that the playwright had considered all these implications.

Harris was raised primarily in the depressed factory town of Martinsville, Virginia, and his mother sacrificed so he could be educated in private schools. Her son, no doubt, was preternaturally gifted: He has a brain like a bullet train,

"I wasn't a fighter when I was little, but I did have a mouth on me—a mouth sharpened with the tools of white supremacy."

"To cancel is to believe that change doesn't matter, that change is impossible and that people's psyches are static."

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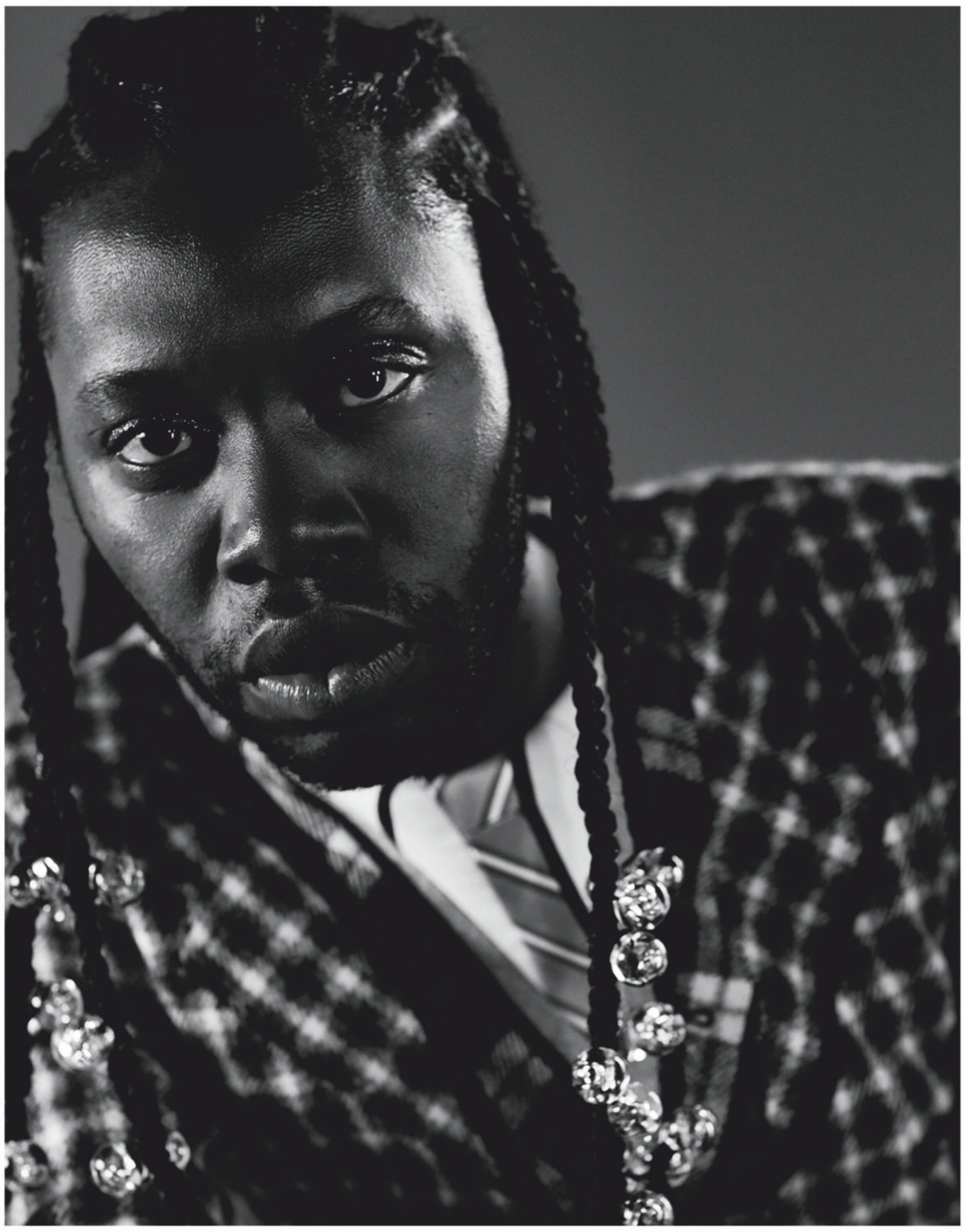
PHOTOGRAPHY BY **CHRISTELLE DE CASTRO**

rocketing between the most brilliant scholars on race and theory and the most exciting (and almost entirely female) artists in hip-hop. He's a queer black writer who has obsessed over James Baldwin—all of Baldwin, not just the dutiful race man. He's well-versed in Saidiya Hartman and mentions L.H. Stallings's *Funk the Erotic: Transaesthetics and Black Sexual Cultures* the way others recommend a hot new album. In fact, *Slave Play* earned him a fan in Rihanna, whose song "Work" features throughout the play and who shares his naughty and complicated approach to sexuality and performance. (Harris interviewed the pop star for a *New York Times T Magazine* cover story this spring.)

Three days after *Slave Play*'s Broadway run was announced, PLAYBOY sent filmmaker, writer and *Surviving R. Kelly* executive producer **dream hampton** to meet Harris at Sunday in Brooklyn, a popular south Williamsburg restaurant. Wearing a sleeveless floral wrap dress, his afro adding inches to his six-foot-five frame, Harris was sun-kissed from a recent Fire Island retreat. The restaurant happened to sit a block away from the former Domino Sugar factory where artist Kara Walker presented her monumental 2014 installation *A Subtlety*: a 35-foot-high sculpture of a black woman—posed like a Sphinx, wearing a mammy headscarf and baring her vulva—as a complex commentary on chattel slavery and plantation economics.

The work comes up implicitly in Harris's play *Daddy,* which ran off-Broadway to more acclaim and controversy early this year. In a conversation between the protagonist, Franklin, a young black artist, and Andre, his white art-dealer "daddy" (played by Alan Cumming), Harris makes a crucial distinction: "Beauty is beauty is beauty, Franklin," says Andre, "no matter whose eyes are seeing it." Franklin replies, "It's a nightmare or a dream you're witnessing. But I share it." The unfixed dynamic between the two men, with its transactional and exploitative shadows, elicited some scathing social-media threads. Controversy aside, it's easy to imagine interracial couples who attend Harris's plays having similar debates.



hampton, who interviewed Me Too founder Tarana Burke for our Summer 2019 issue, reports: "Harris evokes the experimental wing of the late-1960s and early-1970s Black Arts Movement, which gave us wild plays like Amiri Baraka's *Dutchman* and Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro*—transgressive, formally daring works written at the height of the black power and feminist movements and the free-love revolution. When I saw the online pushback against Harris, it reminded me of the many ways Kara Walker was accused of anti-blackness. Because she 'plays' with images of chattel slavery, Walker has infuriated a vast range of critics. It seems many of us aren't willing to engage with collective cultural trauma in that way. But Harris is, and like Walker he's accruing mammoth success in rarefied spaces even as he colors far outside the lines. His refusal to offer easy answers or present static identities, for his characters or himself, is what I wanted to hear more about—starting with the choice to take his work to the overwhelmingly white and upper-class environs of 42nd Street."

PLAYBOY: As *Slave Play* heads to Broadway, you've been on Twitter, offering deeply discounted tickets. A *Guardian* review of *Slave Play*'s New York Theatre Workshop run said, "If the fantasies of white people are transmitted to us through film and weaponized as policy, do they need to be repeated in the theater—perhaps the whitest of white spaces?" I'm wondering about the white gaze and how it factors into your work.

HARRIS: I think we're in a moment now when a lot of makers and audiences of color are very conscious of the white gaze in a way that's really exciting. It's partially because theory has become much more a part of our natural discourse. Tumblr started that, and now everyone has a casual relationship to Saidiya Hartman.

PLAYBOY: Or Laura Mulvey or Roland Barthes.

HARRIS: Exactly. It's wild. Living in a space of ideas can separate us from feelings sometimes—which isn't a bad thing; it's just a fact of thought. One of the things I like about being a dramatist is that I get to play with where pathos and logos exist inside my work and put them in a lot of different spaces. But when it comes to the white gaze and how it intersects with black thought, I think a lot of times we're not using our full thought in public spheres, because there are certain spaces where we're very protective of black bodies in relationship to whiteness and some places where we have no interest in taking care of them—even in the online discourse around what it means for a black woman to be twerking for a slave owner in front of a white audience. For instance, YG literally released a music video with black people dressed as slaves; there's also a lynching scene. I don't know if people know this about rap music, but it's *pop* music, and a lot of white people are listening to it. What does it mean to Cardi B to be doing the "Money" music video and twerking in a glass box for a group of white people? I feel those sorts of interrogations don't happen as publicly or as loudly as some of the interrogations around what it means for a character in a film or a play.

PLAYBOY: So why make work in those contexts? Why work in literary theater instead of urban theater?

HARRIS: Part of the reason is because I'm more interested in how I can use my voice and the spaces I come from to challenge a canon I was trained in. I just know that canon, and it exists inside literary theater. So part of my work with the white gaze is about forcing white people to look at my body differently than they've had to look at it before. Maybe that means making people look at abject parts of the black body, or making people look at the black body in pain and ecstasy in ways they wouldn't with *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom.*

PLAYBOY: I don't want to give too much away to readers who might see *Slave Play* on Broadway, but you have this reveal about 35 minutes in when the audience realizes they're watching something *inside* of something else. When you've sat in the audience, have you ever noticed a sigh of relief at that moment?

HARRIS: It's interesting, because the first act is sort of an endurance test. Some white people are like, "This is the most disgusting and offensive thing I could ever see. What are you doing to me? Why are they *laughing?*" And some black people are like, "What the fuck is this? Why is *she* laughing? Why is *he* laughing?" And then there are other black people in the room who are like, "This is the funniest thing I've ever seen." I've noticed a lot of my friends who grew up in the South are able to enjoy the first act as pure satire and camp. They already know from the top that something's up in a way that I think a lot of my friends from the North have a weirder time with. It's just a very different understanding of that type of performativity.

After the shoe drops at the end of act one, you hear all sorts of gasps echo throughout the audience, and it's exhilarating. Just before that moment, there's always about two or three couples who have already grabbed their bags and are ready to leave. And then "the thing" happens. Sometimes they stop, but sometimes they've already walked out. There are always these interesting things, seeing the people who were about to leave be like, "Wait a second." They stay and then go into this more meditative space for another hour and a half.

I'm interested in how I can use my voice to challenge a canon I was trained in.

PLAYBOY: I'm sure you're familiar with Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s *New Yorker* piece "The Chitlin Circuit," written in response to a speech given by August Wilson in 1996. Wilson was basically beating up on black audiences for not showing up for his plays. Gates wrote this epic piece saying that, actually, black people *are* going to theater in record numbers; they're just not going to see Wilson's shit. They're going to see Tyler Perry put on by drug dealers and starring retired R&B artists. Can you talk about that kind of schism?

HARRIS: I'm not someone who had the privilege or the money to go to New York and see plays growing up. I also didn't have a family that was very interested in allowing me to do that; they were like, "You like plays? We like plays. Let's go see Tyler's play in Greensboro." It was startling to me the first time I ever saw an off-Broadway theater, because it was so much smaller than the Greensboro Coliseum Complex, where I'd seen Tyler's work. Tyler did a show for thousands of people multiple nights in a row. When I did the show in New York, I was like, "Mom, this is a huge deal. There are like 200 seats in that theater. *Huge* deal." Like a lot of young black theater artists who grew up in working-class environments, I hated Tyler Perry. I thought he was the death of all things good. It was righteous to say that. It situated me in a different space of class. I was like, "I'm not broke. I like *good* theater. I like August Wilson. I like Adrienne Kennedy."

PLAYBOY: What, if anything, turned you around on Tyler Perry?

HARRIS: About six or seven years ago, I thought, Wait a second: Tyler Perry is doing the exact same thing that all the downtown experimental white people are doing with stereotype, with a sort of associative dramaturgy. He's actually working in a space of experimental theater that I think a lot of people don't know or recognize because he's black and because his work is Christian. If people just studied the text and what he's doing dramaturgically, they would see that it looks more like a Wooster Group show than not. I became obsessed with him.

Something really curious to me is that there are all these conversations around black artists working in this space in the theater: If you're in the August Wilson tribe of playwrights, it doesn't matter how many white people you write your plays for or how many white people see your plays; you're still in that tribe and you're doing the right black thing. But there are certain black people who aren't doing the right thing, and they're making a place for white people. Actually, when *Slave Play* was first being talked about as moving to Broadway, it was annoying because you had to have all these meetings with landlords. Broadway is basically run by four different companies, and if for some reason they don't vibe with your work or don't see it as viable, they don't have to rent to you. There's a lot of politicking, a lot of people moving a lot of things and a lot of talking to a lot of white people with a lot of power. At a certain point I turned to one of my commercial producers and said, "Dude, I can't do this anymore. I don't want to go to any more meetings. I'm in grad school. At this point in my life I'd much rather rent out the Kings Theatre and invite Rihanna to come see it there—because she would come, and it would actually be more cool for me. Maybe it's better if the play is just one of those weird New York phenomena that happen in Brooklyn and never go anywhere else. Then I can sell seats for $13 if I want."

PLAYBOY: The Kings Theatre, of course, is in the predominantly black neighborhood of Flatbush, Brooklyn.

HARRIS: Anyway, that ended up not happening. But it has been part of my thinking for a long time that if none of us wanted to do these plays for white people, or if we didn't want to do them in these white spaces, we wouldn't. But there's something about the little clout you get by being in that spotlight, or even just the training we've all gone through where we're just, "I can't waste all this time I spent reading Chekhov to go to Atlanta and hang out with people who don't know what *The Seagull* is." You know what I mean? I'm excited about the ways we can hopefully start destabilizing these systems of power *inside* the literary theater world so that we can have more intersections and so that conversations around Tyler Perry being one of the most influential playwrights on black working-class makers in general can finally start to be part of the academic understanding of what theater is.

Slave Play, Daddy and [2016's] *Water Sports*—it's exciting that those were the first three plays I wrote, because they were all trying to make sense of what my black body means after being, in a sense, kidnapped by white supremacy. Kidnapped because we grew up in a place with very few spaces to keep a black child safe, and one of the places my very young mother decided was the safest for me was in a private school where I was one of the only people of color. You learn very quickly when someone's shaping or positioning you to end up with the potential to have a better life than they've had, or a better life than they can foresee anyone else in their environment having.

PLAYBOY: How did private education change you? How did it find its way into your work?

HARRIS: The place I come from, Martinsville, Virginia, is one of the opioid capitals of the country. It's like a dead factory town. My mom somehow made it so that I was one of the few black kids to get out of Martinsville and go somewhere else. I think my self-actualization, as I was becoming an adult man, was, What did I give up to do that? What did it mean when I was growing up that I *did* at times weaponize the intellect and tools of white learning that I had to make myself feel I had some armor against homophobia or whatever? I wasn't a fighter when I was little, but I did have a mouth on me—a mouth sharpened with the tools of white supremacy. So when I was cutting some of my cousins with these fucked-up words, I was also cutting myself. I think a lot of my self-actualization has been me learning how to heal those cuts and processing what my body means in this white world.

I'm such a loud and aggressive liberal. I'm also a loud and aggressive troll at times.

All the characters in my plays have been trying to self-actualize outside the space of whiteness. I think what people might find troubling in my plays is that they're seeing the self-actualization happen in the third act, because I want them to actually experience that cutting, those bruises, those bumps and scrapes that you get as you navigate as a black body through white supremacy, as a queer body through white supremacy and heteropatriarchy. And as a female body in all these spaces as well—something I observed my mother and sister and grandmother do. I want you to sit inside that so you understand their self-actualization. One of the beauties of drama is that you can watch someone have an epiphany in real time, and it might force you to have some new self-actualization or to move into some new evolution in your own psychic journey.

PLAYBOY: Before we move on from *Slave Play,* I want to talk about the giant mirror on the set, which literally puts the audience—again, mostly white people—onstage. Can you talk about that choice?

HARRIS: First of all, I was really nervous about getting a director, because I'd talked to four directors and none of them said the right thing. I would always ask, "By the way, what kind of set are you thinking of for this?" They would always be like, "I don't know," or they'd say something truly crazy. The only answer I wanted was that it would feel like I was inside a plantation. That was the whole thing. It's how I'd done it at Yale when my friend Em Weinstein directed it. The first thing we did was work with this kid, Gordon Landenberger, and we told him, "We want to feel like we're in a plantation. They've given us a $200 budget. How can we do that?"

PLAYBOY: And he put the mirror on the set?

HARRIS: No, at Yale it was a three-quarter thrust stage. The way we did it was we laid out the entire foundation of a plantation in tape, and it looked like a map of a plantation. All the seats were on top of it, and you could see everything. And so the first plan we had was that we were going to all be in the round in the New York Theatre Workshop, and in our first conversation with Robert O'Hara [director of the off-Broadway and upcoming Broadway productions], the first thing out of his mouth was "You know what we're going to do? We're gonna put these motherfuckers in the goddamn plantation." But they couldn't afford it; they didn't have the money, and we were so angry. Then Clint Ramos, our set designer, who's a genius, said, "I think I have an idea." He made this mirror backdrop, and immediately we knew this was the set it had to be. Part of what was really fun about doing the play at Yale, with the three-quarter thrust, was everyone watching everyone else. I saw everyone become hyper aware of the black people sitting across from them, or the white people sitting across from them, or the mixed-race couple sitting across from them, or the mixed girls sitting right there. The racial project of America

went into stark focus inside the room, especially during the second act. We saw people shifting uncomfortably, people looking at partners, people not knowing if it was okay that they'd just laughed, because they saw someone else on the other side freaking out. For me, I've only ever wanted to work inside a theatrical space where people have to be in conversation with each other after they leave.

PLAYBOY: Speaking of uncomfortable reactions, I want to ask you about that Trump midriff tee you were photographed in a few years ago. I'm sure you've seen that photo used against you many times. What's the story there?

HARRIS: That photo is used all the time. My friend Nimrod took that picture when he came to visit me at Yale. I was so hyper and excited that I was a first-year student at Yale, you know? I got that shirt from a friend who was doing a documentary series, basically filming the GOP thing, and I'm such a loud and proud aggressive liberal. I'm also a loud and aggressive troll at times, because I'm a Gemini, and when they saw the shirt they were like, "Oh my God, Jeremy will fucking love this." Actually, it was going to be in the first version of *Water Sports;* I got it right before I started school, and *Water Sports* was the play we were doing then. I was always getting these weird downtown Los Angeles plays. I'd done a play where Rachel Dolezal and Dylann Roof are siblings, and it was this insane, crazy thing. So everyone was like, "What would Jeremy do if this was a prop he had?" And I was like, "I actually want to publicly wear this as a crop top and just experience the world like that." It was that simple. In my mind, when you have maybe a thousand followers who are all your friends, the intent and the impact of what you're doing always intersect, because every one of those thousand people knows who the fuck you are. So it was difficult to see that picture become weaponized and misconstrued afterward. But I was also like, "I don't know what to tell you guys. I literally just wrote a play attempting to call out white supremacy even in the minute interactions we have every day. So I don't know why you would think I would be pro a white-supremacist president." I sent out a tweet like, "I'm not a Trump supporter. I never was. I'm not an accelerationist. I never was."

PLAYBOY: You probably wore that shirt before Kanye wore the MAGA hat, though.

HARRIS: Oh, I definitely wore it before he wore the MAGA hat. I 100 percent did it before Kanye did.

PLAYBOY: And you have to understand, when we first saw Kanye in the hat, we thought, Is this a joke? Is this supposed to be ironic? Is he being a contrarian? What was your reaction to seeing him in the MAGA hat?

HARRIS: I didn't think he was a Trump supporter until he started talking, and then I knew. This also intersects with the idea of performing wokeness. This will probably get me in trouble, but there are very few people I believe in canceling unless they do physical, violent harm to someone. Unless they do actual harm to multiple people, I'm like, "Wait, let's figure out where their brains might be."

> ***Sometimes when you've gone a little crazy, the craziest choice makes sense.***

PLAYBOY: You don't believe in canceling?

HARRIS: I think that to cancel is to believe that change doesn't matter, that change is impossible and that people's psyches are static. I think psyches are not static, and neither are thought patterns or interests or even our sex and sexuality. Nothing about us is static, so why should we decide that someone's position is static and therefore they can be canceled? Unless someone has done actual harm to me or my community through action and not just words, I'm like, "Let's figure out where the fuck they might be coming from or figure this out in a different way." Or just disengage.

For me, Kanye was one of the only people who actually helped push forward certain aesthetic positions for black artists in hip-hop. Now, did he borrow a lot of things from other artists in order to do that? One hundred percent. That's a fact, but that's also a fact of art-making writ large. I think we'd never had such a public artist who was reaching so many people, saying, "Hey, we can also do *this.*" A concert can be where we intersect with Vanessa Beecroft, you know what I mean? And the same with Beyoncé, who has been doing that so deeply with her videos and how she's reshaping what the black female cinematic imaginary can be. Is she stealing from Julie Dash? Absolutely—or not stealing but *borrowing* from Julie Dash and countless other amazing artists. Yes. But now people can google *Daughters of the Dust* and get it because of a Beyoncé video, and people weren't getting that before.

So anyway, when Kanye started doing his Trump speechifying, I was like, "What is going on with Kanye?" I had to write about it. I wrote this play called *Ye* that was in *T Magazine.* I was just like, "Being someone who has unchecked mental illness for a very long time, who has dealt with major loss and has also been sort of glorified as a full god must make you want to root for another public crazy person—someone who actually might be a path for you to make the sort of change you thought you were going to make through your music and that you've seen has only made you money and also created a deeper alienation. You thought that, by getting to one level, you would pass some test and be free of white supremacy." And he kept hitting up against it. That was his whole fashion journey: "I'm at dinner with Anna Wintour, but you guys won't give me my own fashion label at a luxury house." Yeah, because that's how white supremacy works. You don't just get to pass one test and go to the end. I can see how that would kind of make you go crazy, and sometimes when you've gone a little crazy, the craziest choice makes sense.

So I just saw that on a different scale—but that's not the point of the T-shirt. The T-shirt was just, at the time, saying, "This is fucking insane. This person is running for president and I'm going to queer this shirt and disrupt it." I think in the spaces I was wearing it, I did disrupt, but it has disrupted my own life in ways I didn't expect. So thanks, Trump.

PLAYBOY: And thank you for that

digression on Kanye. Of course his wife provided great cover for him by working with the administration and also by kind of gaslighting us: “Watch me get two black women out of jail.”

HARRIS: She’s such an interesting case to me. Because what she has done is kind of like gaslighting, it’s very difficult to critique. I don’t even know what space this is intersecting. I don’t know what else she talks about in those rooms when she’s making these deals, which is crazy. And what does it mean that she’s devoting her life to justice? Is it just for the good look and the bob, or does she actually want justice for different people?

PLAYBOY: Let’s shift to *Daddy* and its references to Kara Walker. Like her, you’ve had success in your 20s. I saw Walker attacked as an artist when she first came out, and I’ve seen her be rightly reconsidered in recent years. In *Daddy,* Franklin, the protagonist, argues with the white “daddy” character about *A Subtlety,* which is of course about sex and slavery, as is much of your own work. What about you: Where do you stand on Walker?

HARRIS: I think I’ve always been more interested in work that gets a big reaction from people than ones that get a small reaction. I remember being 15 or 16 and reading about Walker and just thinking, Who is this woman, and why does her work look like a cartoon? I just couldn’t stop looking at the images. But as I’ve matured, even as her work got problematized and then reconsidered, I’ve always thought that at least she’s saying something. Most of her inquiries have been around the histories of chattel slavery on the black erotic and the black erotic imaginary. She’s saying it in her full voice, and I like people who talk in their full voice.

PLAYBOY: You sound as though you’re describing your own work.

HARRIS: Yeah. I think those things were really palpable for me. Part of it is because I’ve always been able to clock where desire is living in a space or in a room. When I was in fourth or fifth grade I told my mom that my stepdad was cheating on her. I just saw it and was like, “Oh, Dad is lying. That’s what’s happening.” My mom found out because of me. So I think I have an attraction to people who seek out the erotic or where desire lives inside their work—especially where desire and violence intersect. Those things drew me in really quickly early on. I’m excited to see how I’m moving away from that in my new writing, to get to other spaces around the erotic—spaces where violence maybe exists in different ways. The play I’m working on now, *Black Exhibition,* is more about where the erotic or desire intersects with capital and what that means for my identity.

PLAYBOY: One of my questions was about how the erotic can be used to combat racism and white hegemony. There are also questions around how it can be used to combat racial capitalism or, say, ecological disaster. Can the erotic be used to push back against all these things?

HARRIS: Sometimes I wonder, despite what my work is doing, if in some ways I’m still a Southern prude. I have a lot of friends who are Forest Faeries. For some people it’s a spiritual thing, but for others it’s actually political. I was like, “Is it a politic to be a funky white gay fucking in the forest?” I’m not sure, because I don’t know what that liberates us from or how that destabilizes anything other than the position of your penis. But I also think their presence in Tennessee does displace some sort of power structure ingrained there. But where I see the power of the erotic really having an unimpeachable force is in art. When the erotic hits art, something in the air changes. Did you see the Jermaine Dupri–Cardi B thing?

PLAYBOY: Dupri basically dismissed all contemporary female rappers as “strippers rapping.”

HARRIS: There’s something really interesting about this man’s deep anger over these women getting so popular by talking about the same things that men have talked about in every single one of their songs forever. I was truly confused. I was like, Do you listen to *men* rapping? In every song that DaBaby has put out this year he’s talking about how he’s going to fuck someone’s girlfriend or someone’s wife, or how everyone’s trying to get on DaBaby’s dick, and that’s why we love DaBaby. DaBaby’s funny, and he sounds sexy, and you’re like, “Cool, DaBaby!” But Cardi or Saweetie or Megan Thee Stallion doing the same thing—now this is the space that’s not okay.

The black female erotic is something we’ve lived in fear of in our country for centuries, and now we have women who are able to stand and speak in a full voice about.... I mean, not *now.* They’re on the backs of all the women who said, “This is who I am. Get into it.” And they’re doing it for seemingly no one but themselves. That’s what always makes me excited about hearing Megan Thee Stallion: She’s doing the erotic for herself. It makes people immediately want to dance, but it also makes a lot of people immediately want to activate their violence against her. Even if it's just Trey Songz being like, "Yo, when are you gonna let me hit it?" That's violent. So I think their erotic has the potential to make ripples in that space.

I'm still trying to figure out which ways the erotic can displace identity-politics capitalism. I feel we're in this space where wokeness has become capital, and we've immediately fallen back asleep inside the American dream, where my identity markers as a queer black man make me a much more profitable person inside a space of capital. It actually gives white supremacy more power, and I'm trying to figure out how I can undo that.

PLAYBOY: Articulating that also affirms the cis-hetero black men who have been attacking you—and me, for my recent work—saying that this success is because of your queerness or our feminism, not because of our blackness. But for now, let's stay focused on pleasure and the erotic: What was your earliest sexual awakening, and what were your first ideas of pleasure?

HARRIS: I had an erotic life that was very much situated inside *this* space—and the gesture I'm making is a circle around my head.

PLAYBOY: Cerebral.

HARRIS: Yeah, I had a cerebral relationship to sex and sexuality that wasn't as immediate as that of some of my friends who'd discovered porn. I was genuinely like, "What is *that?"* The first thing I ever masturbated to was Britney Spears's "I'm a Slave 4 U" video when I was in about eighth grade. I put off masturbation for a really long time. I think it was because a deep part of me knew I was gay and didn't have an outlet for that besides my best friend, who is also gay but with whom I would never have wanted to experiment, because he was like my brother. I had a lot of girlfriends, and for me a lot of the pleasure came from the intellectual space we got to live in together. It wasn't until I went to college and started to have fervent hypersexual relationships that I started to realize, Oh, I actually would rather have sex with a man. That was an accumulation of watching a lot of foreign films and realizing I was more and more drawn to ones with men at the center of the erotic life of the film.

PLAYBOY: What's an example?

HARRIS: *The Dreamers* was major. *Y Tu Mamá También* was major. A lot of French movies, like *Swimming Pool*—I love that one so much. The movie that made me most like, Okay, Jeremy, you need to really check yourself, was *Fish Tank,* which has become a big space of conversation today because of Andrea Arnold. I remember watching Michael Fassbender in that movie and thinking, *Oh,* I'm gay. So I broke up with my girlfriend—it was a whole thing. And then I started actively sleeping with men right after I turned 19.

PLAYBOY: I find that—and this is me talking to you from a different generation and having a Gen Y daughter—there's a lot of asexuality with kids. I don't want to be too reductive and blame everything on tech, like, "Y'all just *text* everything," but everything has become more cerebral. I'm not trying to crack the code, because it's not mine to crack, but it's interesting.

HARRIS: Well, our generation is having less sex than previous generations, which has been crazy to talk about. I had this deep, romantically enriching relationship that was completely asexual for about six months. I had to stop. I was like, "Wait, what is going on? I feel like at any other time in my life we would have had sex already. This makes no sense." They were like, "But I don't want that. Isn't it possible for us to be soulmates who don't have sex?" And I was like, "*Maybe?*"

PLAYBOY: Yes. The answer is yes!

HARRIS: But I knew that something I would want from my soulmate is the sort of erotic potentials you don't have with a roommate or a best friend.

PLAYBOY: Okay, my last questions are about success. I recently did a project that more people watched than anything else I've done in my life, and I know you've been dealing with similar levels of attention and acclaim. This sounds mad entitled, but success can be burdensome. Demands are put on you, and you start to understand every Hollywood story that ends in drugs or suicide or some other tragedy. I don't mean to pose this as a typical self-care question, but how do you stay sane?

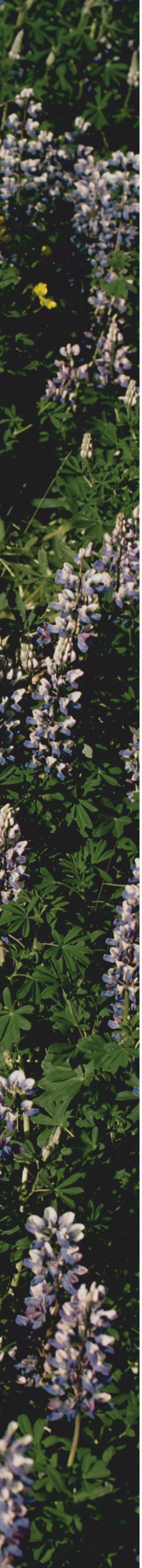
HARRIS: I don't do anything enough. I've been trying to meditate at 2:30 every day using Headspace. It's the best, but I don't do it enough. I'm trying to force myself to start reading again, because one thing that started to happen when things got so fast was that I stopped reading. I used to read every new script that no one else had read yet. I'm also trying to get out of thinking only about myself, because that's the real trap: constantly talking at your friends about how crazy your life is and forgetting to focus on them. One thing I am consistently getting better at is asking my friends to just download on me—asking what's going on in their day and actively forcing myself to not shut off and think, Oh, my Broadway thing is happening and I need to....

PLAYBOY: But how about the work? How are you going to stay focused, inspired, whatever, as your star continues to rise?

HARRIS: I think the thing I'm most afraid of is not being able to have the freedom, the sort of looseness I had with my work that allowed me to write *Slave Play* or *Daddy.* Because now I'm constantly thinking about what tweets I'm going to get about the play. Then I'm like, Jeremy, you know who you are; you know why you write; you don't need the noise. And all these people telling me that they're going to Broadway for the first time to see my play are making me think, Okay, your impulses are okay. You're doing something right. Forget about all these other crazy people who don't actually want to see you as a person. And I'm not saying that people who don't like the play should be dismissed. I actually want to have a discursive conversation around the role of black artists inside white space. What are the questions that people can have about me being a black queer man who has done a play with a black woman at the center of it? Which is again something I find curious, because every single one of my other plays is about black gay men, so should one always stay in that lane? What is the role of the writer in 2019? It might be that in 2019 we don't want men to write women, which I'm like, "Great, maybe that's just what we do."

I'm excited about the next two plays I'm writing. I tell myself, Jeremy, you're not going to judge yourself. You're not going to ask yourself, Is this as good as *Slave Play*? Is this as good as *Daddy*? You're just going to write them with the same sort of energy you wrote all your other plays. I'm really scared of one of them, like, Oh my God, this play has nine men in it. What does that mean? Are you allowed to write a play with nine men in it anymore? I don't even know, but I just did it, you know? And it feels really good. ■

ON THIN ICE



A social-media-fueled tourism boom saved Iceland from economic ruin. A decade later, is it leading the country to environmental collapse?

BY **CIARA O'ROURKE**

Selfie sticks punch the sky as three women bob through the milky-blue water. They look like knights charging against a strong wind, but they're young and they're American and they persevere. Their hair is piled high on their heads, and they purse their lips as they gaze up at their iPhones. Behind them, a man takes photo after photo of his partner as she swans in small circles. She reviews the shots with a severe expression as he shields the screen from the sun.

When their images post to Instagram, they will all appear to be alone in this otherworldly watering hole, the Blue Lagoon, situated about 45 minutes outside Reykjavik, Iceland's capital. In real life, they're surrounded by tourists from countries such as Pakistan, Algeria and Poland, all similarly posing in the steamy, geothermal seawater or making their way to the bar, where the first glass of sparkling wine is on the house.

The Blue Lagoon warns its patrons that it's important to stay hydrated while wading in the 100-degree, silica-heavy pool. Flowing on one side of the lagoon is a metal fountain etched with the words PURE ICELANDIC WATER to signal where visitors can fill their cups for free. If this seems like a marketing ploy to make local water sexy, it's working. One woman's eyes go wide as she tells me how great the tap water tastes in Iceland, better than back home. The country's tourism board playfully rebranded tap water as *Kranavatn,* a word that literally translates to "tap water."

Good marketing is behind Iceland's tourism boom. The country's seemingly pristine landscapes abound on social-media screens and draw more than 2 million visitors to its shores each year to hike behind thundering waterfalls or to see up close the canyon where Justin Bieber shot his "I'll Show You" music video. Some land at Keflavik International Airport—the main entry point for foreign travelers—because they're seeking something more ancient than the Colosseum in Rome, less defiled than Tulum. Others are here because they've seen Iceland's remote vistas on Facebook or on *Game of Thrones,* which often filmed here. But as the number of tourists has spiked, with yearly visitors outnumbering permanent residents sixfold, traditional systems have broken down. Locals know not to venture onto a glacier in sandals and to stay on designated paths when hiking. Visitors, in their attempts to get photos that don't feature other gawking tourists, traipse farther and farther off the trail, destroying plant life. Tourists pluck the words SEND NUDES in moss that will take decades to regrow.

The culprits in that very real crime against a hillside are unknown, but you can picture them. News reports have warned about a crisis in the country, one that's overwhelming everything from hotels to national parks. Iceland's environment is fragile, and it's being threatened by too many travelers. But tourism helped yank the country out of an earlier crisis, buoying the economy after the debilitating collapse of 2008. And here I am, ready to experience a country whose rapidly expanding popularity may be permanently damaging what lured me here in the first place.

• • •

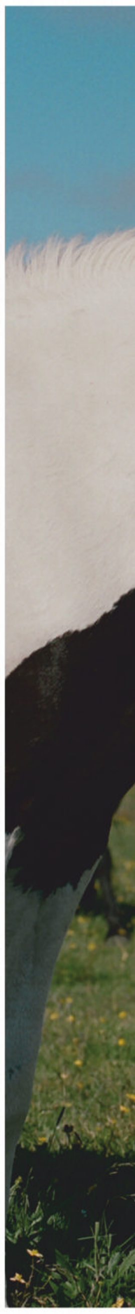
I'm seated next to a man named Jason on my flight from Paris to Reykjavik in late June, and I tell him my plans for the next five days: Drive to a town near the Sólheimajökull glacier, which I'll climb with a tour group recommended on TripAdvisor, then drive to Reykjavik and visit the Blue Lagoon and the Golden Circle, a popular tourist route.

Normally I avoid talking to anyone on planes, but I notice Jason's driver's license is from Washington state, which leads us to discover that we graduated from the same college in the same year. The coincidence does not feel so impressive when I recount the number of people I know who've visited Iceland in the past few years—nearly two dozen. One of my favorite stories: A woman was in a coffee shop in Reykjavik when she asked the person sitting next to her to scoot over. In a country with only about 350,000 residents, perhaps it's also not so remarkable that the woman was Björk.

Tourism has played a vital role in helping Iceland recover from the 2008 economic crash, says Sigríður Dögg Guðmundsdóttir, a spokesperson for Visit Iceland and

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **CHANTAL ANDERSON**

Some residents feel Iceland has become a cartoon of itself.



Left: Situated on the south coast, Reynisfjara is one of Iceland's most visited black-sand beaches. Acclaimed for its beauty, the beach is also notoriously dangerous due to the water's strong undertow.

a sort of hype-woman for the country. The industry has grown rapidly, from fewer than 500,000 visitors in 2010 to 2.2 million in 2018. The country used to be a landing pad for planes to refuel before heading on to Europe or North America. But Icelandair and, before it collapsed in March, WOW Air, offered stopover deals that helped secure Iceland as a travel destination.

In some ways that growth has been a boon, Guðmundsdóttir says. Restaurants and other services have opened in rural areas, where residents now have entrepreneurial opportunities that didn't exist before the tourism explosion.

"People are able to move back into the towns and villages they grew up in because they can create jobs for themselves," she says. Höfn, a town of barely 2,000 where Guðmundsdóttir used to live, now supports a large grocery store and three restaurants—amenities that locals alone couldn't sustain.

But the influx of tourists has also strained infrastructure, she says, especially at the most-trafficked sites, including the Golden Circle. The canyon from Bieber's music video, which has almost half a billion views on YouTube, closed temporarily after Beliebers from across the globe overran it, destroying delicate vegetation. Another hiking spot, Reykjadalur, also went dark after Iceland's environmental agency decided it had been endangered by tourists. A 2018 report from the Minister of Tourism, Industry and Innovation says beloved vistas including the Dverghamrar basalt columns and the Gullfoss waterfall are all at risk of damage.

Some of these sites were simply never meant to be popular. The country has an "Icelandic Pledge" that it encourages tourists to take, promising to travel responsibly, camp at campsites and so on. The tap water campaign aimed at tourists is a national effort to cut back on plastic bottles. At gas stations, Styrofoam and paper cups, ubiquitous in the United States, are hard to come by. If you want a coffee to go, you'll often need to bring your own mug or buy a reusable one.

Iceland chairs the Arctic Council and holds the presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers, and one of its three focuses for the latter is sustainable tourism, including "decarbonization" of the industry. A member of the Paris Agreement, the country aims to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 40 percent of 1990 levels by 2030 and be carbon neutral by 2040. A 50 percent increase to its 2010 carbon tax went into effect last year. Iceland also wants to electrify its vehicle fleet. The impacts of climate change are already apparent, says Guðmundsdóttir. But, she adds, "there's a really strong will in Iceland to preserve nature and maintain tourism as a sustainable industry."

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It's bright and cold when I land in Keflavik. It's summertime, so the sun won't set till around midnight. Driving on near-empty roads to my Airbnb near Hvolsvöllur, I pass purple Alaska lupines, an invasive plant species, blanketing the rolling, rocky hills. There are as many tour buses barreling down the Ring Road, the route that loops the country, as there are cars. Navigating through small towns I see hostels and buildings with Airbnb logos affixed to the windows.

The waterfall by my Airbnb, which you might know as #skogafoss, is majestic. Campers have set up tents near the base, and a woman is furiously adjusting her selfie stick in the spray while climbing the hundreds of steps to the top. As lambs gallop down the grass beside the stairs, the place feels peaceful, even private. I could see the waterfall from a nearby restaurant, which seems emblematic of how tourism affects rural towns—part of the cottage industry supporting the interlopers who are changing these communities.

It's still light when I fall asleep at the Airbnb. A chicken coop backs up to the guesthouse, but the rooster never crows. The next day, my host smiles gently as

Left: The Icelandic horse has lived on the island since the 10th century; today it's bred for sheepherding, competition and leisure riding. **Middle:** Vandalism to plant life has become a concern following increasing reports of intentional destruction. **Bottom:** Landmannalaugar, a popular hiking destination, is surrounded by mountains and obsidian lava fields.

she presents breakfast: bread made with barley from their farm, homemade dandelion and rhubarb jams, Angelica pesto and lamb paté. The eggs are from their chickens, the milk from their cows. Seated around the table are more people from the U.S., including women from California, Florida and Seattle and a man from New York City. He was in Europe for work but took advantage of the stopover and is visiting Iceland for about 48 hours.

Judy Butler is in Iceland because the airfare to Ireland from her home in Kittery, Maine was too expensive, plus a lot of her colleagues at the school where she teaches English have been here and liked it. Butler and I soon depart for the Sólheimajökull glacier. The trail leads us through an ash-covered icescape that our guide, a British man named Simon Rees, calls Mordor. The ash, left over from past volcanic eruptions, insulates the ice, forming dark peaks and valleys near the water's edge.

"First chance for photos for all you instagrammers," Rees says after a few minutes of walking. The actor who plays Jaime Lannister on *Game of Thrones* posted a selfie he took on Sólheimajökull, Rees says before encouraging us to ask him questions about glaciers. Or the TV show. I ask about the show. First he tells me he didn't like the ending. Then he points to a sign hammered into the earth that marks where the glacier reached back in 2010. According to Rees, it's one of the fastest disappearing in Europe.

"And I'll leave it up to you to decide why," he says, skirting any conversations about climate change. (Soon after my trip, the Copernicus Climate Change Service reports that July was the hottest month ever recorded on Earth.) In brief, he tells us, there's less snow in the winter and more melt in the summer. The same amount of ice has disappeared in the past 10 years as in the past 100. Icebergs sticking out of the lagoon like meringue won't exist by the end of this summer, he says, and he notices more breaking off all the time. Later, he shows me a photo a friend of his took from the same spot in September 2018. There was a wall of ice. Now there's water. Tour guides will need to jump the stream, he says, and then build a bridge.

Above: Jökulsárlón is Iceland's most tourist-friendly glacial lagoon and, with a depth of 814 feet, also its deepest lake—a result of glacial retreat due to rising temperatures spurred by climate change.

"Eventually we won't be able to get here at all."

Retreating glaciers can be increasingly hard to access, says Nathan Reigner, an Arctic Fulbright Scholar in Reykjavik, but the glacial melt is also creating new sites, like the Jökulsárlón glacier lagoon that formed when glaciers calved and melted along the south coast. As more of these sites have emerged, he says, there has been an "arms race" for who can develop tourism businesses to meet the skyrocketing demand. What one study early in the tourism boom called a "surprising lack of planning and control at the national level" led to a spate of visitors and tour companies that were ignorant of environmental sustainability guidelines.

Reigner is a recreation and tourism consultant with a background in park management, concentrating in part on crowding, capacity and conflict. At a coffee shop in downtown Reykjavik he gives me a primer on Icelandic tourism.

To wit: Tourists have been coming to Iceland since the 19th century. At first it was rich Europeans. By 2008, when the economy crashed, the country hosted about 500,000 visitors a year. The financial crisis's encore was the volcanic eruption that grounded flights on the continent for weeks.

But the krona, already a volatile currency, was down steeply against the dollar. It became cheap to venture here, and Visit Iceland, the country's official tourism arm, rallied to save the 2010 summer tourism season. It worked. By 2013, about 800,000 people were landing in the country each year; by 2017, more than 2.2 million.

As adventure-seekers visited Iceland and exposed their friends and family (or followers) to images of the country, those places became destinations. And Iceland didn't have the structures it needed to support the surge. A range of goods and services have followed the tourists to towns of all sizes. Even Reykjavik has more bars, Reigner says. Locals are

Above: At about 40,000 square miles, Iceland is roughly the same size as Kentucky. Outside the Ring Road, much sightseeing is done via hiking trails, which traverse the country across three national parks.

Below: Landmannalaugar ("People's Pools" in Icelandic) is dotted with hot springs and serves as the starting point of the 34-mile Laugavegur hiking trail.

happy their swimming pools are open later.

During the summer, on any given day, about one in five people on the island are tourists, Reigner says. But as the krona regains its value, visitors are staying for fewer days. That means their land travel is limited. It might be more appealing to stay on, say, the Golden Circle than spend a day driving to a more remote coastal village. This causes problems by concentrating the environmental footprint within a small area. Distributing tourists more evenly across the country can reduce the negative impacts. For example, Keflavik airport currently centers traffic in the country's southwest region, so in 2015 the government resolved to develop new flight routes to lesser-known airports, such as Akureyri in the northeast.

Icelanders are split on how much the tourism industry benefits their communities. Generally they're happy with it, but some feel priced out or crowded out, Reigner says. Others feel Iceland has become a cartoon of itself. The government developed a plan to collect reliable data to improve transportation, infrastructure and more. And, Reigner says, they've been largely successful. By looking at issues including freshwater, wastewater, nature sites and carbon footprints, the country seems to be tackling the conflicts that stem from tourism. Still, many Icelanders believe tourists "spoil" nature. I ask Reigner if he agrees. He leans back in his chair and thinks for a second.

"Intensive use," he says, "requires intensive management." He goes on to say that no "management machine" could have coped with the rapid growth of tourism in Iceland.

"It's not that people did a bad job," he says. "It's that the job is impossible."

When Reigner first visited Iceland, in 2015, he thought it was a playground. Now he thinks about it more holistically. He wishes he could help tourists connect more with the culture, a challenge on a weeklong or weekend trip. Being a tourist means going somewhere to find meaning for yourself, but in doing so you also change the meaning of a place.

Reykjavik surely feels changed, though compared with when, I don't know. The waiter at a downtown restaurant speaks English to me before I say anything. More Americans stumble in, and a Japanese man at the table next to mine demands the wi-fi password. Watching the people pass by outside, I wonder if any of them are from here.

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By the time everyone has boarded the Arctic Adventures minibus for the Golden Circle tour that ferries tourists from Thingvellir National Park to the Geysir geothermal area to the Gullfoss waterfall, 12 of us are buckled in, plus our guide, Heimir. Nine are from the United States and five, including me, live in Texas. A couple from San Antonio tells me about a cave they visited that may be closed because tourists keep scrawling their names in the bacteria covering its walls. The guide showed them one such graffito from 2006 that's still visible today. Cori Clymer, who's here from Philadelphia to celebrate her 50th birthday with her mom, passes around a dried fish snack. Michelle Brinker, from Houston, takes my photo at the national park, a UNESCO world heritage site with a parking lot full of sightseeing buses. One tourist climbs over the rope installed to keep visitors away from a cliff. He wants a better photo.

One story Heimir tells us about tourists sits with me longer than the rest. It dates to the early 2000s, before the tourism boom. People hoping to see a UFO land on a glacier had descended on Reykjavik, renting cars and driving into the rural countryside. Many ran out of gas before they could find filling stations. Others showed up at overbooked hotels. The region wasn't equipped to host so many people at once, but farmers opened their doors and welcomed the ignorant travelers. That same hospitality is on show today among Airbnb hosts and restaurant servers who patiently wait while I fumble to find the correct amount of krona to pay for a meal. For my final dinner in Iceland I eat at Skál, in a food hall in Reykjavik. (An American suggested it.) Sitting at the bar, I order a skirt steak that another American, sitting nearby, recommended. After it's placed in front of me, the woman next to me nods and smiles. I feel as though I've finally earned a local's approval, but when she speaks, it's clear she's American.

"So good," she says. Then she pulls out her phone. ■

PUSSY

POWER

Marilyn Minter has been thoughtfully shocking people for 50 years. Here, the legendary artist shares never-before-published work and weighs in on the importance of defining pleasure on one's own terms

BY **KIMBERLY DREW**

When I arrive at Marilyn Minter's studio in midtown Manhattan for our interview, I'm greeted with an iced coffee and the artist's favorite chocolate chip cookies. Minter wears a RESIST T-shirt, a design collaboration with the grassroots political organization Swing Left. "Resist" has become a rallying cry in this political moment; for Minter, a lifelong activist and vocal proponent of reproductive rights, the campaign is just one example of how the multimedia artist uses her practice as activism. (I wore a MY BODY, MY CHOICE shirt from the emerging fashion designer Collina Strada, quietly hoping Minter would think it was cool.) The sartorial choice is a testament to how Minter suffuses every choice she makes with intention—from her outfits to her chic studio layout to the sustainable straw in my compostable coffee cup.

My fascination with Minter's work began when I was in college, when images from Tom Ford's fall-winter 2007 collection popped up on my Tumblr dashboard. I knew very little about Ford and even less about whoever had taken the photos, but I was seduced by their grittiness. In one shot, the designer devours a soft pink cake; in another, a model covered in rain—or sweat—purses her lips as she gently caresses her glasses. Unlike more traditional fashion photographers such as Steven Meisel or Annie Leibovitz, Minter produces images that aren't about the products or the models—they seem to speak directly to the viewer's instinctual desire.

The 71-year-old artist has always explored beauty and pleasure from unexpected vantage points. Born in Shreveport, Louisiana and raised in south Florida, Minter did not spend her early life on a crystal stair. In her 1969 series *Coral Ridge Towers,* shot while she was in college, we get a glimpse of her opioid-addicted mother at home in Fort Lauderdale. "In Florida, we were in the land of no parents," she says of her and her brothers' strained relationship with their mother and father. In the black-and-white images we see their mother, splayed across her bed, applying makeup and taking pleasure in her own gaze. At first glance these images, which won the praise of pioneering photographer Diane Arbus while she was visiting Minter's school, could just as easily be portraits of a retired Hollywood starlet; instead they provide an intimate look into Minter's past. "I knew she'd pass out and never get out of bed and always wear nightgowns and float around," Minter says of her mother. "It was all this kind of bastardized glamour." That glamour would remain a key motif in Minter's practice for the next five decades.

Although not exactly a household name, Minter is widely respected in the arts community, first gaining notoriety in the 1980s through a series of exhibits at the feminist gallery Gracie Mansion and later by receiving a prestigious Guggenheim Fellowship, in 1998. Since then, her photographs, paintings and videos have been shown in galleries and museums around the world, including at the 2006 Whitney Biennial.

Unlike many of her peers, Minter boldly straddles fine art and commercial art. She refuses to be relegated to one way of making, or presenting, her images. In her 2006 work *Shit Kicker,* for example, she takes the idea of "shoe porn" and presents a model in snakeskin stilettos kicking up mud. As the model's ankles torque, you wonder if she's being dragged back to a dancing partner or pivoting toward freedom. In 2016's *Deep Frost* (pictured opposite, bottom left), we see a tongue pressed on frozen glass. The tension is palpable as the icy landscape is cleared by the heat of the model's breath. Few other visual artists are so committed to the erotics of the everyday or to the sticky sweetness of what it means to be alive.

Minter has also left her mark on pop culture, working with the likes of Miley Cyrus, Lady Gaga and Pamela Anderson. In 2007, she shot Anderson for the European art magazine *Parkett.* "I took all her makeup off and gave her bangs," says Minter. "I want women to have images of themselves for their own pleasure and amusement." In 2008, she collaborated with the legendary streetwear brand Supreme on three skateboard decks. Minter's 2009 video *Green Pink Caviar,* which depicts a woman's tongue languorously swirling green liquid candy around a sheet of glass, served as a backdrop during part of Madonna's "Sticky and Sweet" tour; the eight-minute video was later displayed on digital billboards above Sunset Boulevard and Times Square. *Gossip*

"Art history has always sanctified women. I want them to be sexy, sensuous and beautiful." **Opening pages:** *Big Mouth,* 2017. **Opposite, clockwise from top left:** *Chin Up,* 2019; *Big Breath,* 2016; to be titled (work in progress); *Deep Frost,* 2016 (all enamel on metal and previously unpublished).

Girl fans may recall the large-scale Minter pieces in the van der Woodsens' foyer. And in 2013, Minter had a dancing cameo in Jay-Z's star-studded "Picasso Baby" music video. (Both Madonna and the Carter family are Minter collectors.)

Minter's studio practice has also aimed at reaching new audiences in unexpected places. Back in 1990 she purchased air time during *Late Show With David Letterman, The Arsenio Hall Show* and *Nightline*—at a cost of $1,800 per 30 seconds—to promote her *100 Food Porn* exhibition at the Simon Watson gallery, reportedly becoming the first artist to advertise on late-night television.

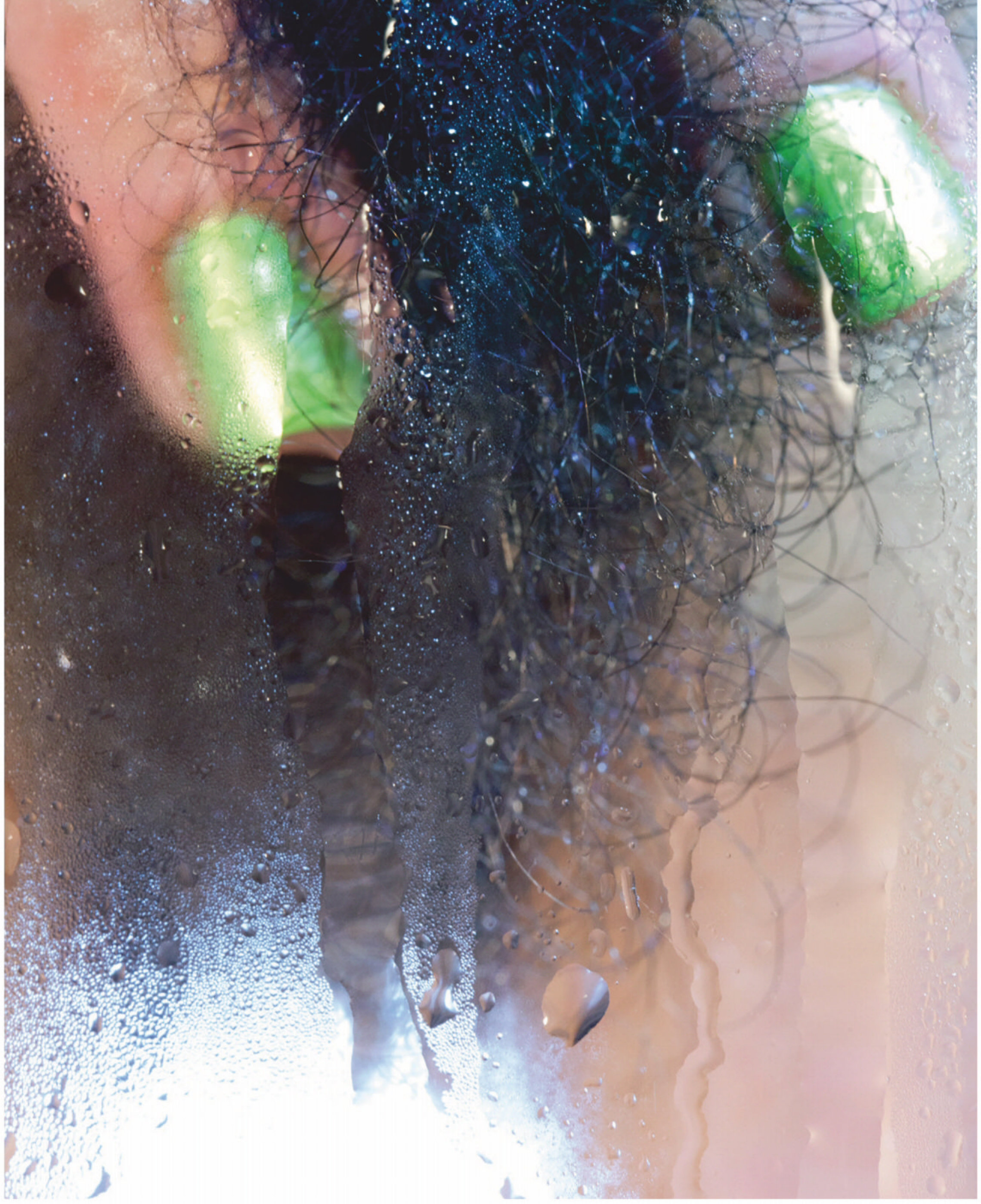
In her 2016 museum retrospective *Pretty/Dirty,* curated by art scholars Bill Arning and Elissa Auther (selections from which are featured in these pages), Minter presented a comprehensive look into her practice without shying away from work that wasn't received well critically. Take her 1989 *Porn Grid* series, composed of rasterized pop art paintings of men and women giving blow jobs. The images, all inspired by real porn, were immediately rejected by some of her feminist allies. "Nobody has politically correct fantasies," she tells me. "And there was this giant anti-porn movement happening because of Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin. They really wanted to ban any sexual imagery whatsoever, and I love porn." Rather than turn away from complicated subject matter, Minter chose to see her work come to fruition in its rawest and truest sense.

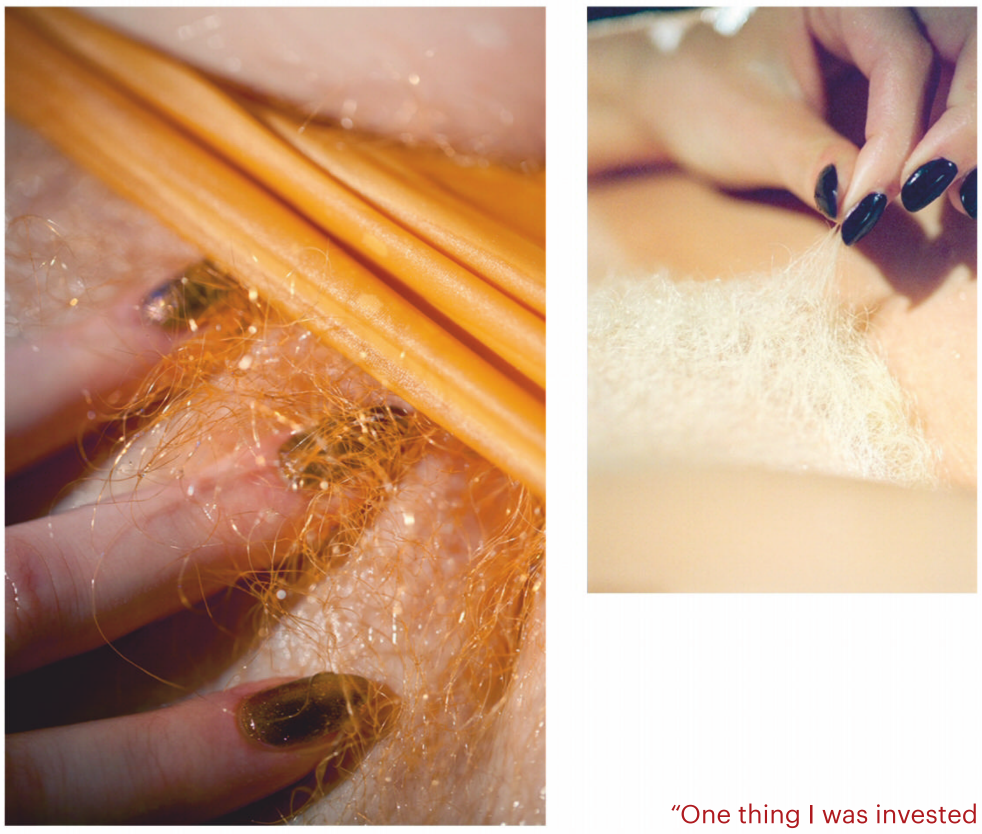
Minter has continued to create art that challenges viewers to reexamine the way they define beauty and, by extension, depictions of pleasure.

In 2012 Playboy invited Minter to participate in an independently produced project that ultimately became a one-off supplement to this magazine, entitled *Playboy A–Z.* She began creating her *Bush* series, which provided the visuals used for the letter *B.* Over eight months, Playboy paid models to grow out their pubic hair, and Minter photographed each of them. In the images, we see subjects with manicured nails showcasing their luscious, bushy pubic areas. Well lathered and representing every color of the rainbow, each bush serves as a call to action for pop culture

"NOBODY HAS POLITICALLY CORRECT FANTASIES."

"I want women to own their sexual agency." **Opposite, from top:** *Orange Crush,* 2009, enamel on metal; *Green Pink Caviar,* 2009, video still.





"One thing I was invested in was including pubic hair from women of all races and colors." **Clockwise from top:** *Plush #9, #7* and *#18;* **opposite:** the original incarnation of *Plush #2* (all archival ink-jet photos).

and art history to celebrate pubes. "There's nothing wrong with pubic hair, and it's been totally erased in art history. We all know Courbet's *L'Origine du Monde* and that's it," Minter says. One has to wonder: Why are there so few nonpornographic images of pubic hair—male, female or across the gender spectrum?

Two of the *Bush* photos were selected for the *A–Z* project—and both were reshot, in Minter's words, "behind wet glass to obscure them slightly." One of the images was flipped on the page, resulting in a perspective that doesn't reflect the model's point of view as Minter intended. The original version of that photo, as well as other *Bush* images unpublished in *Playboy A–Z,* are presented here.

In late 2014, Minter evolved the *Bush* series into a book called *Plush.* "I tried to make the images so beautiful that they could be in any house, gallery or museum," she says, "but as soon as people realize what they're looking at, they don't want them anymore. I don't care. I'm still making paintings and shooting different people."

I was curious why Minter wanted to share more *Bush/Plush* images in PLAYBOY now. "The new PLAYBOY has a fresh vision of female agency," she explains. "The women own their sexuality." Like a true Cancerian, Minter brings love to each project and faith to every opportunity. She's an artist who knows who she is and what she hopes to give. "My experience has been that if you feel absolutely terrified to do something, then it's probably legitimate."

Minter's life and work serve as reminders that there's always more good to be done. This fall, she'll continue to work with Swing Left, as well as Downtown for Democracy and Planned Parenthood, doing her part to fight against this administration. Almost every thread of our conversation eventually circles back to the struggle for freedom—even when we're talking about pleasure, which, as her artwork makes clear, often comes in unexpected forms.

"Pleasure is transitory," she says. "I have to find pleasure in being of service or doing activism or helping other individuals. That lasts longer than great sex, because even when I have all the things I thought would satisfy me, they never do." ■

THE pleasure OF NOT BEING RESPECTABLE

ON THE BLACK EXPERIENCE OF JOY AND INDULGENCE AND NOT GIVING A FUCK

BY **JELANI COBB**

Somewhere in the sprawling mythos that was his life, John Arthur Johnson—a.k.a. the Galveston Giant, a.k.a. the Big Smoke, a.k.a. Jack—the son of former slaves and first black heavyweight champion of the world, checked into a room at the Seal Rock House in San Francisco. The hotel's tolerance of a colored man, even a great and laureled one, was not to be presumed in the fall of 1909. The primary concern, however, was not the champion but his female companions: Belle Schreiber and Hattie McClay, two white women who were competing for his attention. Johnson, literally an outsize figure, all sinew and ripple, black as a power outage, was singularly free, having concluded that his capacity to whip white men in the ring emancipated him from the other mythologies of white dominion. He would keep company with whomever he chose. Both of them.

It was striking but predictable that this kind of freedom—any kind, really—unsettled the whites and therefore had the same effect among the more cautious blacks. Booker T. Washington—titan, college president and ex-slave—criticized Johnson for his indulgences, for needlessly provoking white men whose anger that a man like him could even exist would surely be displaced onto the shoulders of the rest of the colored people. Having survived the travail of slavery and the onset of Jim Crow, the race, Washington thought, would most assuredly be laid low by some ratio of whiskey, ignorance and the pursuit of white women's vaginas.

This nation has never lacked for scolds, but its black ones have the additional credibility of claiming to offer solutions to a troubled and besieged community. Washington's gospel—the creed that had made him famous and powerful and beholden to white robber barons—held that Negroes were at all times to avoid incurring the anger of white men, that they were to remain outwardly subordinate as a means of surviving in a world not made for them. Johnson, posted up in the Seal Rock, might have asked: If those were the terms, what was the point of surviving at all? The story of the two men is trivial save for the ways their exchanges distilled something bigger and maybe even profound about who we are and how it is we get through our days.

At the heart of the various hierarchies in American life is a kind of tiered access to pleasure. Whatever its form—carnal, narcotic, culinary, aesthetic—pleasure is either more easily attained at the higher social altitudes or its indulgence is far less stigmatized there. It's nearly preordained that these scales of joy and indulgence would be bound up in the tangles of race in ways that are both illuminating and contradictory. No wonder then that the *Reefer Madness*–era prohibitions against marijuana deployed the stigma of interracial sex as part of their fearmongering. It's predictable that the recent trend toward marijuana's legalization followed the path of its mainstreaming by white Americans—a pleasure whose consequences always fell asymmetrically along racial lines. The American proscriptions against interracial sex literally predate the nation itself, taking root in the colonies a century before the Revolutionary War. Yet the same architecture of law and custom meant to wall the coloreds off from the joys of American life also made black life obscure, curious and exotic.

The archives of slavery are replete with bullshit rationales coughed up by white men who were forever running up to the slave quarters at night, most often projecting their basest desires onto black women. In the 1920s, white voyeurs overran Harlem, raving that black people and their passionate primitivism were the antidote to the sterility of modern life. In the 1950s, Norman Mailer looked to black people, their jazz, their sex, their etceteras, and found a kind of loose-limbed counterpoint to the uptightness of white American culture. This kind of exoticism tumbled down to the present, manifested in a landscape of interracial porn that turns old ideas on their heads: that black male sexuality can exist as a vicarious thrill, mostly for white people, most of them men. The deepest ancestral prohibition proliferates on the internet, one click beneath the digital surface, in ways that reinforce the old ideas. The attempt to outmaneuver race in this society is not unlike a gambler trying to beat the house: The odds are stacked in the house's favor, and even its losses tend to serve a bigger, long-term victory.

The result is a kind of crossroads effect in American life. The classics of American literature (*Portnoy's Complaint, Howl*) and film (*Easy Rider, The Graduate, American Beauty*) have tended to fixate on the rejection of suffocating societal norms and puritanism. Philip Roth lampooned the sterility of the American suburb, but Lorraine Hansberry centered her most famous play on the struggle of a black Chicago family trying to get a shot at that kind of boredom. For black people, gaining access to the camouflage of mediocrity and normalcy has just as often been the whole point. One side finds heroism in the pursuit of pleasure; the other shrugs it off as a luxury—a thing that might cost you more than it was worth. We Americans approach the matter of pleasure from differing directions.

All this brings us back to the matter of Jack Johnson. He shot back at Washington, clowning him for being beaten over the head in a red-light district where he'd purportedly sought the company of a white woman. Johnson would be beholden neither to white men's fury nor to black men's fears. Life is finite, and pleasure is the balm that makes this fact tolerable. And how you negotiate the terms of that deal, the particulars of your indulgence, is nobody else's business. The logic of Johnson's thinking still holds up more than a century after whatever went down in that hotel room. When confronted with a moral quandary, the wisest course of action is sometimes to simply stop giving a fuck. ■

ILLUSTRATION BY **SACRÉE FRANGINE**

BEING SHOT

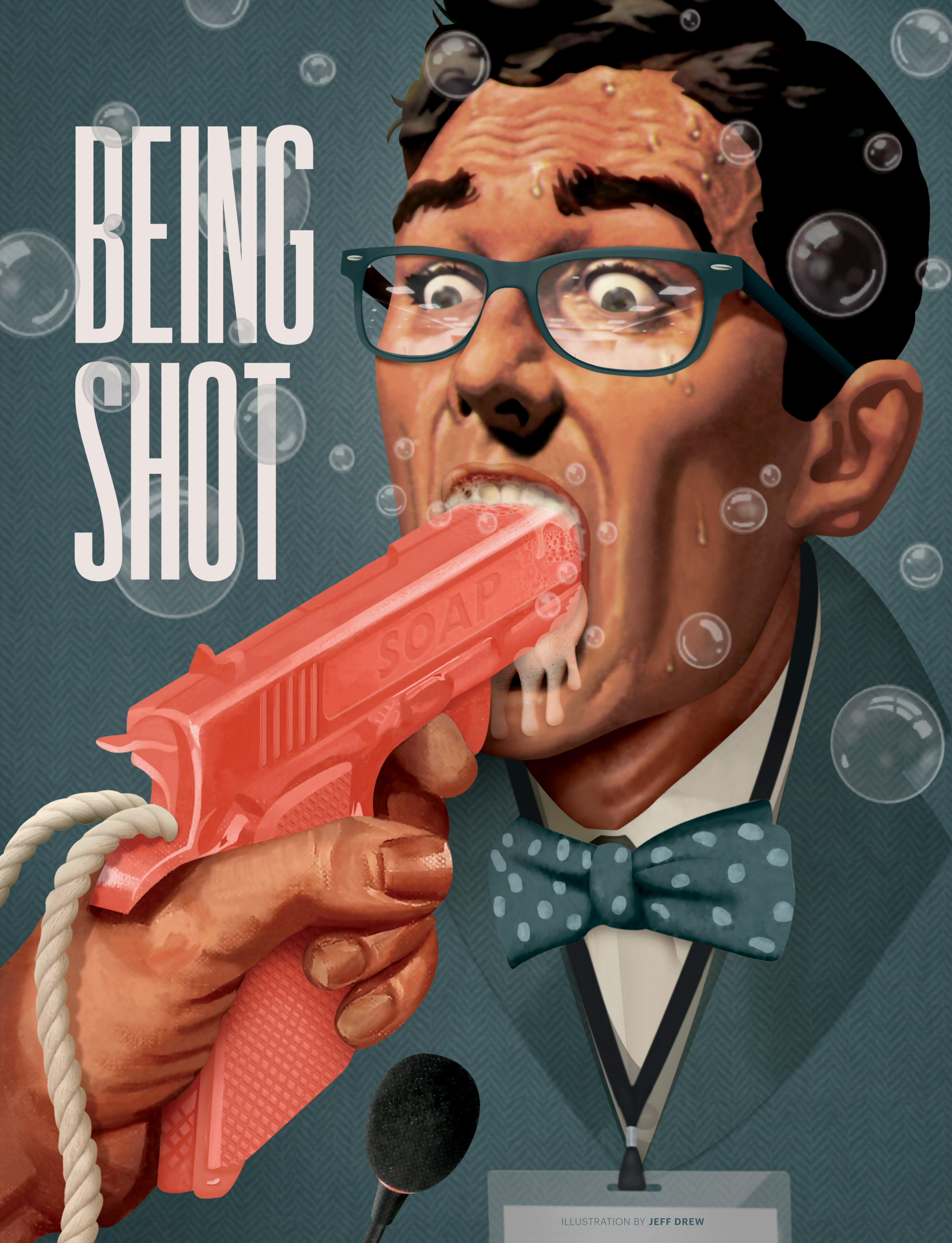


ILLUSTRATION BY **JEFF DREW**

WAS THE PROFESSOR DYING OR MERELY EXPERIENCING A NEW KIND OF AMERICAN DISCOURSE?

FICTION BY
CATHERINE LACEY

When I was shot, I was not surprised. I'd been waiting so long to be shot. Several childhood nights I dreamt of being assassinated by the entire cast of a popular sitcom, or spent afternoons wondering which neighborhood boy could soon shoot me, and I was regularly visited by visions of the mayor or a news anchor or a row of arm-linked Rockettes pursuing me with bullets, and several times I had nightmares that both my mother and my father, each of them, one after the other, shot me in the head. I have never touched a gun—I'm simply not that sort of person—so it has long been my American fate to meet the other end of a trigger. The right to bear arms carries the obligation to bear their burden.

Just before feeling no surprise in being shot, I was, however, briefly perplexed that this long-anticipated event had happened in a particularly dispiriting hotel conference room. The folding chairs and grim lighting simply set the wrong stage—it was somehow too ordinary of a location and yet not quite ordinary enough, not ordinary in the right way. The contrast of the image was set too low. The air felt pixelated. But then, holding my gut wound, I was overcome by how the blood pooling in my hands was as luxuriously temperate as the water of a perfectly calibrated bathroom faucet in a fine-dining establishment, and it was in that moment I fell to my knees, in awe or pain, as the room filled with screams and gun smoke and the smell of burnt flesh.

Hunched over the decorative carpet—a golden floral pattern interspersed with royal green fleurs-de-lis—I struggled to recall the history of the fleurs-de-lis, but all I could remember was the symbol meant one thing in one century, then meant its opposite in the next century, and now it carried both meanings or perhaps any meaning anyone wanted for it, or perhaps it had no meaning at all. True, European history was not exactly my field, but how horrible it was to see how poorly my own brain had held on to history. Hadn't open necks sent blood rolling between Parisian cobblestones? The least I could do—yes, the very least anyone could do—was to remember.

The chintzy chandelier above me was being dismantled by gunfire, and fake plastic crystal rained on my back as I tried to mentally reassemble key dates of the French Revolution. Yet who can be counted upon to recall anything specific when bathing one's hands in such luxuriously temperate fluid, the likes of which you'll find only in the very best fine-dining establishments? We had assembled in that hotel conference room for the annual Conference on the State of Modern Thought, a four-day invitation-only symposium organized and attended by a cadre of multidisciplinary academics, and each night we dined at the finest restaurants in that year's host city, and at the end of each decadent meal we put down our endowment-backed credit cards with a wanton satisfaction we each tried to wear casually.

More specifically, we had assembled in that hotel conference room for a much-anticipated session led by Harold Mennakin, an extremely charismatic but not entirely substantive philosopher of philosophy who was giving a lecture about how every theoretically monumental philosophical idea descended, paradoxically, from the minuscule subjective reality of one person's meaningless life. The title of the talk was "No Great Man," and I had gathered from the pamphlet's description and from a cursory understanding of Mennakin's work that he was making an ethical argument for a philosophical methodology that is self-negating and pluralistic, which interested me in theory but less, I realized, in actuality. Mennakin was in the midst of a clumsy metaphor about intellectual solipsism that involved a pressure cooker and dried beans when our assailant threw open the double doors, hoisted his guns without grace and began shooting.

To be honest, Mennakin had lost me with the bean metaphor—I hear he's a staunch vegan and perhaps his ethical diet has come at the expense of his sense of aesthetics—and though I do agree with him that it's a tragedy we so often fail to see around the corner of ourselves, I was much relieved by the sudden interruption, a relief that lasted at least until I fell to the floor, where my wound issued its seductive warmth into my hands.

Moments later, the shooter paused to deliver some remarks at the vacated podium. The shooter believed us all to be perverts and delinquents who had scammed our way into positions of

THE WORD *PROBLEMATIC* HAD BEEN DEPLOYED AS IF IT WERE A POCKETKNIFE FIT FOR ANY USE.

academic authority, and he accused us of trying to convert the American collegiate masses to our dark and tweedy ways. "All of you should be institutionalized, removed from the mating pool, or worse," he told us, and though I did not agree with him, I had to admit that his delivery was surprisingly compelling. The shooter called us atheists, snobs, intellectuals—to which none of us would levy any objections—"and one of you," he said, "wrote a disgusting story about a dog trying to have sex with a human elbow." And it was appalling and it had to stop and someone had to be the one to stop it. "What the fuck is wrong with you people? Who needs this stuff? Why do you want anyone to think about these things?" Then he resumed fire.

We were all professors, of course, but we were also philosophers and theorists and essayists and economists, of a sort, and though none of us would openly call ourselves artists, a scarce few of us painted or made films and there were a handful who had once or still did publish poetry or fiction in journals that ranged from vaguely available to wholeheartedly obscure. In fact, I had been the one, several months prior to the conference, who had published a poem that included the image of a dog trying to insert his penis into a slit between the speaker's forearm and biceps, a moment that causes the speaker, a man, to empathize with all of womankind. The poem had, to that minor literary journal's surprise, become the focal point of three days' worth of internet debate, and in the many critical takedowns and defenses of the poem, the word *problematic* had been deployed as if it were a pocketknife fit for any use. As a result, I'd been invited to this year's Conference on the State of Modern Thought to give a lecture on the problematic nature of the contemporary use of the word *problematic*.

Lisa Kindalee, however, one of the staunchest critics of that poem's very existence (not to mention its publication), had also been invited to this year's conference to give a competing lecture on the revolutionary nature of the use of the word *problematic* over the past decade of public discourse. To make matters worse, our lectures had been scheduled to happen concurrently, forcing any potential attendee to choose a side before even hearing the arguments in a debate that was not necessarily as diametrically opposed as the session titles made it seem.

I've always been uncomfortable with conflict and competition of any sort, a skittish disposition that was partly what led me into academia in the first place. I've always had an aversion to games and sports, despite possessing a somewhat hefty physique. At a young age I longed to be a history professor, because history made me cry in a way that felt historical, as if I were crying tears that belonged to the dead, as if that sorrow won me an esteemed place in the world, and even as a child I disliked that platitude about history repeating itself, not because it wasn't true—it was and still is, in a way—but because that phrase had been repeated so often that it had become itself, and by becoming itself it had become invisible, a repetition of a copy of a thought, a vacant cheer from the sidelines of a history one is excused from ever knowing because one is actively living through its equally unimportant sequel, as if all years merely slipped from a machine that made years.

But there I was on the floor of a hotel conference room, a Xerox of an American history, bleeding into the fleurs-de-lis. Another plastic jewel fell from the battered chandelier and landed on my shoulder as gently as a tapping finger—excuse me, sir.

The shooter, I'm told, made no rush on his way through the lobby and was tackled, without resisting, by a frenzied security guard, and only then was it revealed that all his guns had been made of 3-D-printed plastic and all the bullets were a sort of rubber semi-explosive filled with an indeterminate molten substance. All our wounds were superficial and every last one of us survived, which means this story can be read without sacrificing a moment of anyone's sincere pleasure in the languid unwinding of late capitalism.

Still—we were all sent to the hospital as a precaution. There was a concern that we may have been exposed to a chemical weapon or merely traumatized or perhaps our superficial wounds were more complex than they first seemed, prone to infection, prone to litigation. As I raised myself from the hotel carpet I realized the pleasant warmth I'd felt in my hands had not been my own beautiful blood but some strange syrupy substance, faintly neon red, perfumed with gunpowder and death. How, I wondered, had this substance been able to maintain such a consistently pleasing temperature, that expertly calibrated blend of hot and cold?

Prior to the shooting, everyone had spent their free time between lectures trying to curry each other's favor for hypothetical favors that might later be needed or given, and a minority among the group took this exercise into the realm of extramarital affairs—though most of those affairs seem to have been experienced only in the abstract and only a very small number were ever concretized—but for the most part the conference is just a way for a group of people to use their obscure interests as a path toward people who might pay them some attention. That's all it ever really is.

After the shooting, however, the entire conference was moved, first unofficially, then officially, to the hospital. A psychologist-philosopher began giving a speech in the waiting room about how the shooting had pulled back a curtain on each of our truest identities; seen that way, it was a kind of gift. When the shots began, some of us had panicked and fled the room, stepping over bodies and pushing past each other, while others had remained supine in our chairs, our latent suicidal tendencies laid bare. Some had thrown themselves over the bodies of those with whom they'd been engaged or merely trying to begin affairs, preferring to usher our spouses into widowhood rather than become a person who has seen their lover, whether imagined or actual, die.

I was assigned a hospital room with many other semi-injured. A nursing student punctured me with an injection needle in several places on both my arms before she finally administered some kind of medication that made me weep and tremble. "Don't worry," she kept saying, as other nurses and academics paced in and out of this room's many doors. "Don't worry." A woman walked the length of the room, from one door to another, with her cell phone ringing some melodic tune several times before the nursing student finally finished her task, my arms a smear of rubbing alcohol and blood and half-stuck bandages.

By then the hospital room had filled with conference-goers and someone had installed himself atop a chair in the corner of the room and begun an impromptu lecture on how no belief is meaningful until it is translated into action. I recognized this as a repurposed version of a talk he was already scheduled to give, about how the two primary problems of the internet were that it created the illusion that digital speech was equivalent to action and that it upheld the illusion that any statement can ever be completely sincere or altruistic—proclamations never occur in a vacuum. The updated form of this lecture posited that, at the very least, the shooter's sincere objection to our works and worldviews—despite being unfounded and logically inconsistent—had led him to action, and when the shooter enacted his beliefs by "shooting" us, he had revealed a dark truth about our beloved Conference on the State of Modern Thought, which is that most of those who participate in it have blindly accepted this lie of the paralysis of the Individual in the Information Age.

As I listened to this lecture I had to turn sideways and fetal on the hospital cot, as it was simply not large enough for me as I am a very large man. I clutched my bruised belly and cried my historical tears, trembling as I was held hostage to whatever drug was flowing in my bloodstream, calling all the shots within my body. It was then the president of the Conference on the State of Modern Thought knelt beside me to say that my lecture had to be canceled as it had been rendered obsolete by recent events, but when I asked him if Lisa Kindalee's lecture had also been canceled, he just said the story was still unfolding, that new lines of thinking were already being drawn, that I would soon have the opportunity to reapply for next year's conference and he would personally ensure that my application was given full consideration by the committee, and with that the president was gone.

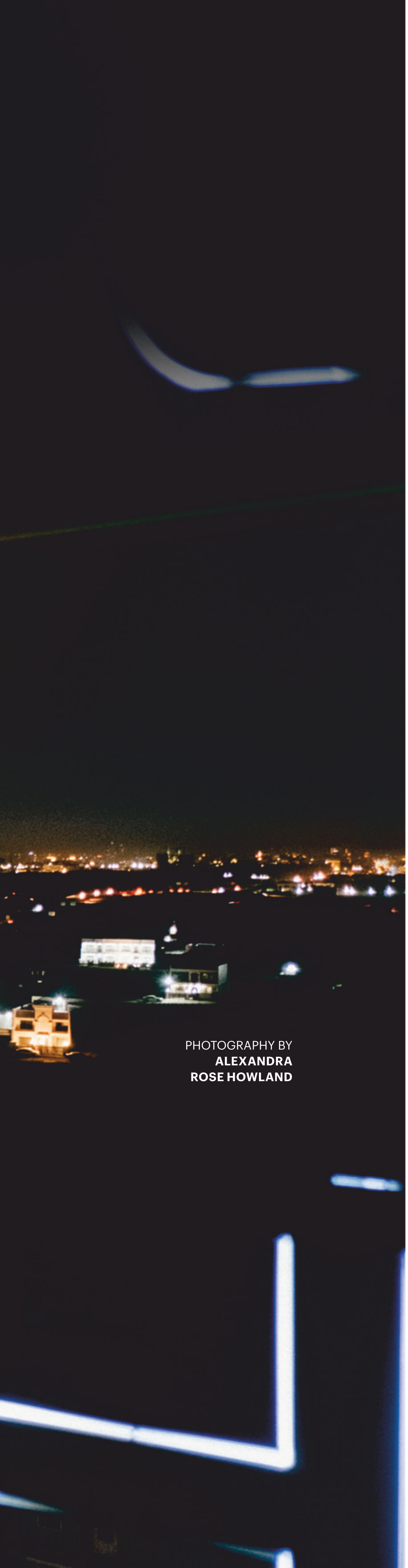
Then a young woman I'd never seen before sat beside me and she looked down at me with a gaze somewhere between somber and sexual. "Are you the one who wrote the poem about the dog trying to fuck the crook of someone's elbow?" I nodded. "I scanned it," she said, and—foolish me—I thought that meant she wanted to discuss my complicated system of mirrored trochees and iambs, a poetic feat that no one ever mentioned in the poem's ensuing controversy, but she hadn't meant that at all. She inserted three fingers into the crook of my elbow, right at the spot where the injection had finally taken, and I wanted to tell her that even though the poem contained the image of a dog trying to fuck the crook of someone's elbow, that didn't mean the poem was about a dog trying to fuck the crook of someone's elbow. That was the thing about art, wasn't it? That the apparent subject concealed the true object? I wasn't sure of anything anymore, I thought, or maybe that's just what the medication wanted me to think. Was I speaking? Was the room spinning? How much of the thing I called my life had been imaginary? The girl skipped away from the cot's edge, and I recalled, for some unknown reason, how utterly modern it was that the neighborhood boys of my childhood were so intent on playing a game called War all summer, though none of them, to my knowledge, ever joined an actual army.

Then, moved by a mysterious neurochemical or moved by some holy spirit of the academic, I stood on my cot and launched into a sermon about a revelation I'd just had: Poetry—sweet Jesus, poetry!—was still alive in America! Had the shooter not been stirred by a poetic creation of carefully calibrated trochees and iambs into action? Had the shooter not been changed by a mere and mighty poem and translated this personal transformation into a physical gesture, a performance, an elaborate gesture meant to elaborate on his thoughts on that poem? It was true (wasn't it true?) that poetry still held real power! Yes, no matter how battered and ignored poetry had become in this era, it still held the power to change the course of history!

I'd become so dizzy over poetry and history that I had to slide back down into a fetal position on the cot, and in my half-sleep I thought I heard someone saying that the shooting had in fact been a work of performance art, and someone else said that the shooter was no less of a monster for being an artist, and someone else argued that true art should have the freedom to do harm, and someone else suggested a New American restaurant with an extensive cocktail list, and someone else argued that just because you call yourself an artist doesn't mean you aren't also a sociopath.

But who are we to diagnose anyone? That's not our field, not really. In our hearts, I think, we just want to be good people who are kind to other good people. We get flu shots for the sake of public health. We read the manuals on workplace harassments and racisms and sexisms very carefully, with somber, serious gazes. And before we leave any washroom, we wash our hands for a full 20 seconds with plenty of soap and attention to the nail beds and cuticles, and we relish the way the water feels as thick and warm as the blood of any human, of any living human at all. ■

NIGHTS IN ERBIL



PHOTOGRAPHY BY
**ALEXANDRA
ROSE HOWLAND**

IN THE HEART OF A REGION THAT FACES AGGRESSION FROM ALL SIDES, THE PURSUIT OF PLEASURE CAN BE DEATH-DEFYING. HERE'S HOW A HANDFUL OF LOCALS DO IT—FROM ROOFTOP BARS TO THE UNDERGROUND DRAG SCENE

BY **KEVIN KNODELL**

In Erbil, the capital of Iraq's semiautonomous Kurdish region, even locals admit that the summer heat is a kind you never really get used to. People go out only if they have to for work, sweating as the sun beats down through a pale blue sky. On the hottest days the breeze feels like a hair dryer blowing in your face.

But as the sun begins to set, the city comes to life. Families and children make their way out into the streets and the parks. Old men break out cards and dice, tea sets and *shisha* (water pipes better known to Westerners as hookahs). Kebab and fruit stands appear on the sidewalks and in the streets.

As the darkness spreads, young people congregate. From street corners you can catch glimpses of young women applying their makeup. Soon enough, the streets get louder and more kinetic. Despite being situated in a deeply conservative—and sometimes volatile—region, this city of roughly 880,000 is known for its bars and nightclubs.

At White Erbil, a rooftop bar above a hotel overlooking the city, a DJ cranks M.O.P.'s "Ante Up" as patrons lounge around a pool. To enter, you first have to get past an armed security detail of men in black military-style uniforms adorned with Kurdish flags. On the roof, local club goers and Western aid workers down beers and cocktails as the pool glows and soft lights illuminate the space.

One of the Westerners is an Iraqi American woman who grew up in northern California after Saddam Hussein's regime cracked down on southern Shia communities and turned her family into refugees. She returned to Iraq a year ago to work with Iraqis and Syrians displaced by the most recent waves of conflict. Dressed in a traditional Arab dress and drinking a gin and tonic, she's debating whether a speakeasy could be successful in Erbil. Kurds and Arabs wouldn't embrace a small, quiet nightlife space, she says, though she concedes that marketing it as an exclusive venue might draw interest. "Iraqis do love the VIP thing," she says.

Then the lights go out and the music stops. Erbil's power grid is a ramshackle patchwork of generators that frequently fail, especially during the summer. But after a quick laugh, patrons go on chatting and drinking as though nothing has happened.

"Welcome to Kurdistan," a fellow patron says with a chuckle.

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Iraqi Kurdistan is surrounded by countries and groups that oppose its autonomy and occasionally bomb its population. Its people have survived displacement and genocide. That gives every

moment special meaning as they pursue life's pleasures—both the simple and the forbidden.

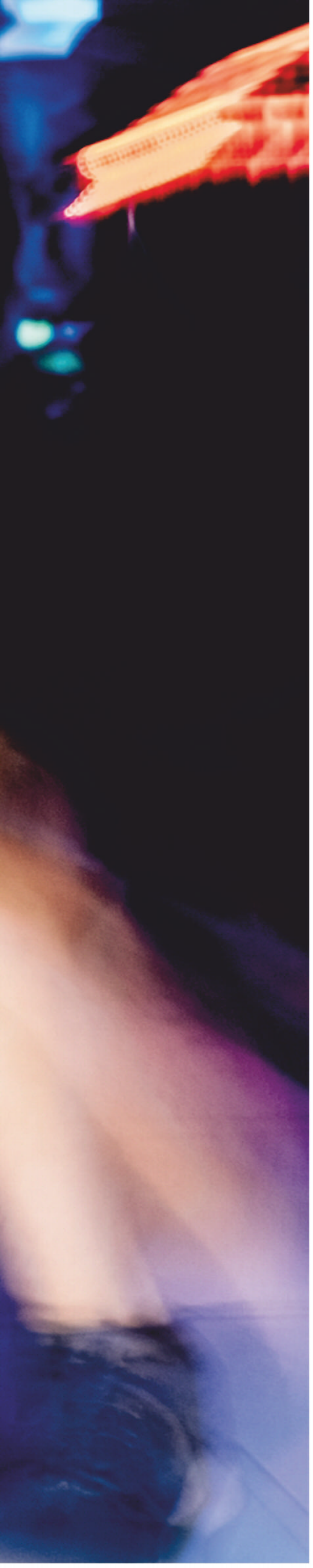
When Western powers carved up borders in the modern Middle East after World War I, the Kurds were not a priority. Today as many as 45 million Kurdish people are spread across Iraq, Syria, Turkey, Iran and the sizable diaspora that exists in the West. They're widely considered the world's largest cultural and linguistic group without a country of its own.

A mountain people, the Kurds are mostly Sunni Muslims. With borders dividing them and few friends, they've faced repression from regional governments for generations. Their homeland's topography has given them refuge from the armies that at various times have tried to kill or subjugate them—hence the Kurdish saying "No friends but the mountains."

From the south, Saddam Hussein subjected the Kurds to genocidal campaigns that included what has been described as history's largest chemical-weapons attack against a civilian population. Iraq's Kurds have also fought among themselves: The brutal Kurdish civil war of the 1990s pitted the Kurdistan Democratic Party against the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, the two dominant parties in the Kurdish government today. But the establishment of an American-led-military-enforced safe zone, increasing foreign investment and a booming oil industry all came together to allow Iraqi Kurdish cities to grow and prosper, resulting in a stability that has eluded other areas in the region.

This haven for its namesake population is surprisingly diverse: Kurds make up a firm majority in Kurdistan, but it's also home to long-established communities of Arabs, Chaldean and Assyrian Christians, Turkmens and Yazidis—and more recently a hodgepodge of immigrant workers and expats.

Of the Kurdish cities that have flourished since the first Gulf War, perhaps none has grown as much as Erbil. It comprises



several neighborhoods that serve as rough nerve centers for various groups—notably the Christian enclave of Ankawa—but the borders are fuzzy, and communities tend to intermingle and spread out. Iranians regularly cross the border for work and leisure, taking advantage of laws that allow them to drink and dress much less conservatively than at home.

> “You have a mix of mercenaries and people who have survived the most extraordinary hardships. They’ve found a common culture here.”

In coffee shops and cafés, people sip tea and smoke *shisha*. Live music colors the evening air, a mix of traditional fare and more Westernized offerings that regularly overlap in beguiling ways. There are salsa nights, a jazz club, burgeoning rooftop bars and lots of outdoor patios designed for the hot summer nights. There are also fancy restaurants that cater to wining-and-dining businessmen, diplomats and Western aid workers charging the bills to their organizations’ expense accounts.

“It can get crazy,” says Viyan, a young Kurdish woman with long curly hair and pale green eyes. She’s wearing a low-cut floral sundress and sipping a Mexican beer at Dusk, a crowded rooftop bar aglow with moody orange lighting. Local art decorates the walls, along with more international influences and pop art. At one table a woman in a pink hijab—the only person in the room wearing one—sits smoking *shisha* at a table shared by much less modestly dressed patrons drinking booze.

Erbil’s bar scene is diverse, but the number of alcohol-serving establishments is limited. That means each venue can draw large crowds. Drinks can be expensive and lines can be long. Viyan explains that young locals often drink before heading out to a bar—or even on the way. “Sometimes we mix cocktails in the back of the car while we’re driving to the bar,” she says.

The Middle East is both less and more puritanical than many Westerners understand. The cultural and historical dynamics are rife with nuance: When the United States government officially put alcohol prohibition into effect in the 1920s, some Iraqi newspapers ran editorials expressing bafflement and condemnation of Americans’ embrace of a policy that denied their fellow countrymen the long-accepted delights of spirits.

Although conservative movements have since become much more entrenched and powerful in the country, when the Iraqi parliament attempted to pass an alcohol ban in 2016, Iraqis forcefully opposed it. “If they had banned alcohol, everyone would have started doing drugs,” one Iraqi Christian woman living in Erbil says—though she concedes that there’s already a fair amount of drug use in Kurdistan. She says party drugs like ecstasy and cocaine aren’t hard to get, but hashish is by far the most popular, even if no one admits it: “Everyone I know smokes hashish.”

Still, Kurdistan remains a land very much steeped in tradition. At its best, honor motivates people to remain honest and fair in business transactions and in personal relationships so as not to bring shame upon family, tribe or community. At its worst, honor can be used to justify violence and repression. “Immoral” behavior such as sex outside marriage or even dating without the approval of one’s family can result in steep punishments—including “honor killings” of those deemed to have insulted the family or tribe.

Needless to say, the region’s LGBTQ community is distinctly challenged by local tradition.

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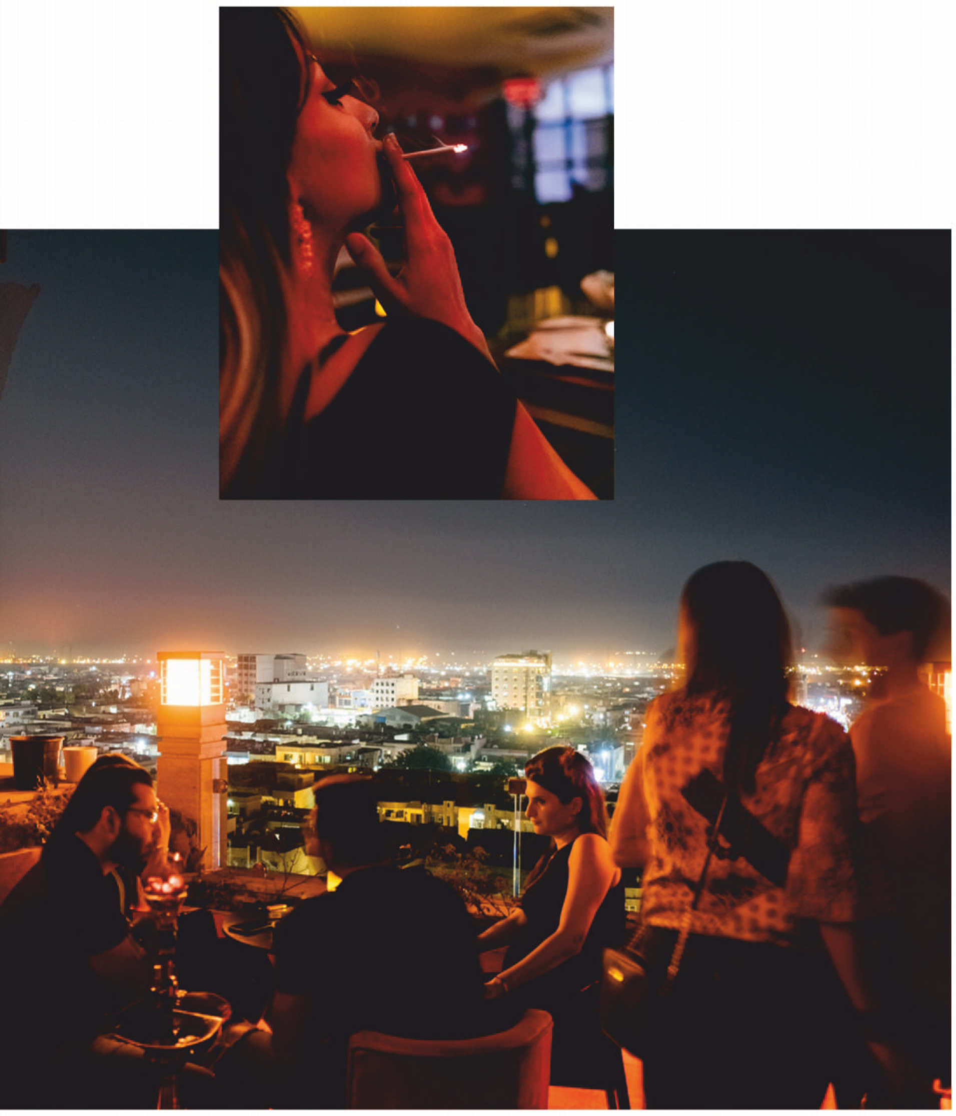
“In my tribe, everything is dishonorable,” says Dante, a Kurdish college student and budding fashion designer who comes from a deeply religious and particularly traditional tribe. We meet at a café beneath Erbil’s upscale Park View apartments. Dante wears a bandanna and a colorful patterned shirt unbuttoned to show off a silver pendant. He explains it was difficult for him when he reached his sexual awakening and realized he was gay. “There were definitely points when I resented myself for it, but I came to realize there was nothing wrong about it,” he says. “I wasn’t hurting anyone.”



Dante grew up in Duhok, a city bordered by Kurdistan's idyllic mountains and close to hiking trails that attract tourists from all across Iraq. "It's a very conservative place," he says of his hometown. "The infrastructure there has gotten more modern, but the ideology hasn't changed much. People there fear change." He longed to go to Erbil, but when he arrived for college he was at first overwhelmed by the city's diversity.

That changed once he found his community. Today Dante is involved in the drag scene and, increasingly, LGBTQ organizing efforts. Although he's aware that there are people in Erbil who disapprove of homosexuality, he says they don't care enough to cause problems for the gay population. "People just don't mind you here," he explains. "They're focused on their own lives."

Dante has been designing clothes for a year and a half, fueled by a quiet but potent ambition: "I kind of want to break barriers here in Kurdistan." He says his family has yet to accept his passion for fashion design—let alone his sexuality. He's out to his friends but still absolutely not out to his family. He lives a double life, switching between Erbil and Duhok modes. "It really splits you in half," he says.

Kurdish women face their own challenges, especially those who live public lives. On September 27, 2018, a group of unknown gunmen killed Iraqi Arab model and social-media star Tara Fares as she drove her convertible in Baghdad. Fares, who split her time between Erbil and Baghdad, was one of Iraq's most popular internet personalities; she was deeply controversial for speaking openly about her divorce after an arranged teenage marriage and for displaying a fashion sense that her critics deemed sinful. Although her lifestyle brought her condemnation, several Iraqi women living in Erbil tell PLAYBOY it was likely Fares's increasingly outspoken criticism of conservative religious clerics that led to her death.

Fares's was the most high profile of several murders of female celebrities and activists in Iraq last year—along with countless nonfatal attacks. Not long after Fares's death, Kurdish model Jehan Hashim announced that she feared for her safety and was leaving Kurdistan, telling her followers on Instagram, "I love my country and I hope to see change when I get back, good-bye Erbil."

That sort of danger means Erbil's bars and clubs tend to be very male spaces. Yet despite the social and physical risks, young women haven't stopped challenging tradition and pushing boundaries. Viyan says that in a way she has taken advantage of—and even sort of enjoys—the lopsided gender representation in the city's nightlife. "To be honest, I like looking at men, and I like having them look at me," she says with a mischievous grin. It allows her to stand out in the crowd as a woman who dares to assert control over her sexuality.

Viyan explains that the women who venture into nightlife spaces have typically been Westerners working for international NGOs, local Chaldeans and Assyrians or particularly adventurous women from Iran. But, she adds, that's changing fast. "There are a lot more girls out here than there used to be, especially Kurdish ones," she says.

Others have noticed a shift too.

"Even four years ago, you just didn't see women going out and smoking *shisha* like now—forget about drinking. And the skirts are getting shorter," says one young Chaldean man visiting home from studying in the West. He adds that young men and women of all groups seem to be getting bolder in their pursuit of pleasure: "Coming back to visit, it almost seems like a different country. Kurdistan has changed."

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American troops and contractors occasionally make their way out to bars and clubs, much to the chagrin of American officials presumably fearing unwanted attention. Last New Year's Eve, two U.S. marines and one Navy corpsman reportedly brawled with a Green

Beret turned contractor outside an Erbil bar and are now being investigated in his death.

"To me, this bar is on Tatooine," says Matt, a scruffy American tech contractor who wears his silver hair tied in a ponytail. We talk as he pounds a drink at Ankawa's T-Bar, a rowdy sports pub. Most of the servers are young Filipina women (workers with roots in the Philippines, Bangladesh and other nations to the East are common here) and the crowd is a mix of locals, Western aid workers and contractors. An American flag hangs in the far corner. Matt came to Iraq eight years ago on a contract in the southern city of Basra and eventually moved north to Kurdistan. He has since traveled the region extensively and has an Iranian girlfriend.

Kurdistan's cultural complexities—and long-standing tensions—are never far from the surface in Erbil's bars and clubs. Most of the venues have armed security details, occasionally manned by battle-hardened ex-militiamen who have fought against the Iraqi army, ISIS and others. Some have a reputation for harassing or denying entry to members of other ethnic and religious groups. Erbil isn't a war zone, but it is surrounded by war. There's hardly a single person living here whose life hasn't been touched by violence in some way.

When ISIS invaded Mosul in 2014, the Kurdish region was flooded with displaced people, adding to the already large number of refugees who had come from Syria. ISIS forces also invaded several Kurdish towns—coming close to Erbil itself—and waged genocidal campaigns against Yazidis and Christians. In 2017 the Kurdish government held a referendum on declaring independence from Iraq, leading to a brief military conflict between the Peshmerga (the region's de facto military) and the Iraqi army that resulted in casualties on both sides. Some Arab residents of Erbil reported facing harassment and even assaults from friends and neighbors during these conflicts, as well as lingering resentment long after.

And yet Erbil enjoys relative stability, which, combined with its proximity to combat zones, makes it an ideal place for foreign militaries to set up shop—and their presence is evident. The Kurdish government in Erbil is considered a key American ally, and the Peshmerga have received arms and training from the U.S. military since the 2003 invasion of Iraq. The roar of coalition helicopters flying overhead is almost background noise, and military contractors coming and going are a common sight at Erbil International Airport.

"It's a strange place where you have a mix of mercenaries and people who have survived the most extraordinary hardships," says Matt. "They've found a common culture here, and what they have in common is that they feel comfortable at the edge of the world."

• • •

Kurdistan is in a constant state of change as its internal cultures and neighboring nations clash. Western politicians, academics and pundits have projected their own hopes, fears and values onto the region. But the people who call it home have to struggle to figure out what these changes mean for themselves and the people they care about—and how they'll go about their own lives and write their own stories.

"I know this double life will end someday," Dante says. He explains that he won't be able to hide his sexual orientation from his family forever—nor does he want to. And when the day comes, his family will have to either accept him or not. He says he's prepared to live his life without them if that's what it takes. But in a society that values family ties and honor and has yet to truly accept people like him, that could be a challenge.

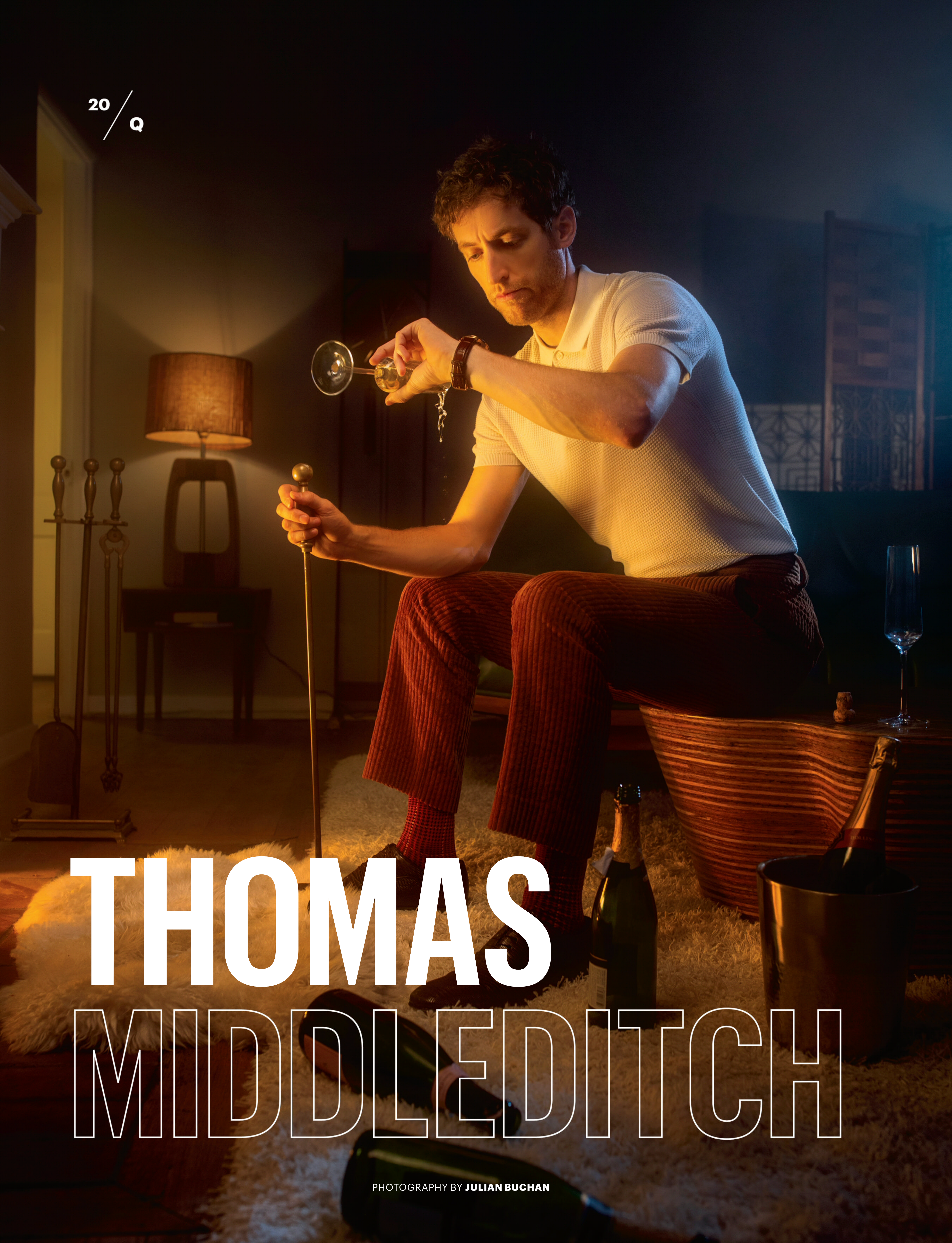
In February a Kurdish LGBTQ activist tweeted at Kurdish deputy prime minister Qubad Talabani, challenging him on his beliefs about whether queer people in Kurdistan deserve equal rights and asking what, if anything, he had done to support them. "I believe all citizens, regardless of race, religion, gender (and or gender preference), ethnic identity and sexual preference deserve equal rights, all over the world, and especially in Kurdistan," Talabani responded. His tweet sent a stir across the region.

Dante says he knows politicians' words can be flowery and their promises fickle, and he's not so naive as to think anything is guaranteed. But the fact that anyone in a position of authority anywhere in the Middle East would make such a statement, openly and publicly, matters to him. Dante's response echoes the stirrings of countless denizens of this beautiful and complicated city:

"He gave me hope that this place can change."

Editor's note: Names have been changed for the sake of anonymity and safety.

20/Q



THOMAS MIDDLEDITCH

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **JULIAN BUCHAN**

AHEAD OF *SILICON VALLEY*'S FINAL SEASON, THE EMMY-NOMINATED STAR OPENS UP ABOUT THE UNEXPECTED—FROM HIS DREAM ROLES TO SEXUAL EXPLORATION TO SHOOTING GUNS WITH ALEX JONES

Q

BY
RYAN GAJEWSKI

Q1: *The real Silicon Valley has changed drastically since Silicon Valley debuted on HBO in 2014. Would it be a different show if it were starting now?*

MIDDLEDITCH: I really don't know, but I do wonder if this show has had anything to do with the consciousness of that. Season six will deal with privacy issues: Richard is pushing a new, decentralized internet where no one tracks or sells user data.

Q2: *The show has been nominated for a best comedy Emmy for the five preceding seasons but has never won. You've been nominated for best actor once. As you head into the final season, does it seem like Silicon Valley has always been HBO's bridesmaid?*

MIDDLEDITCH: I always figured the most I would get would be a nomination. Even if you've told yourself that this is all stupid, when you lose you're like, "I shouldn't be bummed, but I am quite sad about it." I'm sure HBO would rather have the show go on for a few more seasons, but our showrunners are like, "No, this is the story."

Q3: *With Silicon Valley, Veep and Game of Thrones each having their swan songs this year, is anyone at HBO thinking, Shit, we're losing all our great shows?*

MIDDLEDITCH: The TV landscape in general is figuring out how to compete in the new world of television. Players like Netflix have forced everyone to reinvent themselves. I don't think anyone is panicked—I mean, they're cleaning house with *Game of Thrones,* but HBO is a prestige network. In the end, a network has to have just one good thing that people watch in order to get awards.

Q4: *Having left Facebook and Twitter, you're presumably not a fan of Mark Zuckerberg or Jack Dorsey. Do you agree with Elizabeth Warren and other presidential hopefuls who want to break up Facebook, Amazon and other tech giants?*

MIDDLEDITCH: It's a great idea. And no, I'm not a huge fan of Zuckerberg and Dorsey, but I don't like to slight them either. Without selling user data, it's not a viable business. And I still have Instagram. Also, I was never really good at Twitter, to be honest.

Q5: *Do you have a fear of the unknown, post–Silicon Valley?*

MIDDLEDITCH: Of course I do. When something is successful, you're like, Okay, how do we figure out how to keep it going a little longer? There are 4 million shows; we're definitely not the biggest, but people watch us, which is nice. It's a challenge when you're involved in something to make the decision to end it. It's hard to shoot Old Yeller—not that we're Old Yeller, because that would imply we're a sick dog. It's more like crawling into your best friend's window and murdering them. It's hard to do that when you don't know what comes afterward. Even if everyone who's involved in the show is guaranteed work, will it be the same type of work?

Q6: *Has your role in this year's Godzilla: King of the Monsters changed your standing in Hollywood?*

MIDDLEDITCH: I think so. Unless you're ordained as an attractive teen, it's hard to get crazy fame right out of the gate. I would love to do big movies all the time or work with great filmmakers; I would love to star on Amazon's *Lord of the Rings* series and transform as the Riddler in a new *Batman.* I don't think about it analytically, though, because it makes you feel as though you've taken a bath in oil. I just try to do good work so that when I have early-onset Alzheimer's and I'm looking at my IMDb page and my wife tells me, "That's you," I can register that I did some cool shit.

Q7: *You and one of the Godzilla writers visited a swingers club with your partners during production. Are you and Mollie, your wife of four years, familiar with the swinging scene?*

MIDDLEDITCH: I don't know how much I can say, because I don't want my wife to be mad at me. Only after I got married was I like, "Mollie, I'm sorry, but we have to get nontraditional here." To her credit, instead of saying "Fuck you, I'm out," she was like, "Let's figure this out." To be honest, swinging has saved our marriage. We have different speeds, and we argue over it *constantly,* but it's better than feeling unheard and alone and that you have to scurry in the shadows. By the way, it's now called being "part of the lifestyle." The term *swinging* is old.

Q8: *Is being "part of the lifestyle" something you've always been interested in?*

MIDDLEDITCH: Absolutely not. I self-deprecatingly call myself a pervert, but that's not what it is. I just like it. I'm sexual. I'd always thought I was a romantic and that when I fall in love, that stuff fades away. It does for some years—enough to be like, "I should get married, and I'll be different." But it's part of me. If that's part of your being and it feels important to you, find a way to explore it, because repression sucks.

Q9: *Do you have any advice for couples who may be exploring that lifestyle?*

MIDDLEDITCH: For anything sexual—whether in terms of the sex act or identity or kink—you want to know where the walls of the box are. Mollie and I have created our own rules, and compared to most of the people we've met who do this kind of shit, our rules are strict. We're not off on our own; we're together, a unit. It's a perpetual state of management and communication, to the point where it's like, "All right, we've got to stop. Chill." I'm gas, and she's brakes. This is actually the premise for a comedy series we're writing together.

Q10: *How do you identify?*

MIDDLEDITCH: Pretty vanilla, probably cis-hetero. Even if I've witnessed situations that may not be for me, I want to witness them anyway. I'm of the mentality "We're only here once." I don't believe in reincarnation or an afterlife, any of that shit. If I look around, I actually see a lot of shit that makes me sad about the world. This is a positive way of connecting with people and experiencing things on a very selfish level.

I've also been to some weird parties that were very *Eyes Wide Shut,* from which I walked away thinking, I don't need it, but I'm glad I saw that. I've seen some dicks, I've seen some butts, I've seen some tits. It's weird—I've totally gotten to the point where I can see a dick and just be like, "Nice hog, buddy." [*laughs*] And it's not weird. "Man, I'm jealous. Good stuff." I'd like to have gone to the Playboy Mansion, just to have the knowledge. Myself and a lot of other people who start on this journey don't know where they're at in it. They're going, "I think I just need a *thing* to happen. All I know is, this particular situation is hard." I love my wife like I've never loved anyone before. With two people who feel that way about each other, how do you go down that road? It's tough. Bring a therapist along for the ride.

Q11: *Are you concerned that speaking about this publicly could inadvertently make you a face of the lifestyle?*

MIDDLEDITCH: I would be honored to be the face of something. I don't give a fuck, but my wife is more private, so I have to juggle that. I don't think I would ever be the face of a full-tilt, your-body-is-my-body lifestyle. The perception is that you open up that door and it's *Eyes Wide Shut,* which isn't necessarily the case. You can go to that party, of course. You pay the fee, you'll go. [*laughs*] My mantra is, How can I explore this with a 1960s, peace-and-love, full-understanding, everyone's-connected-and-feels-good kind of way? Not every corner is explored, but you have to be patient. I battle my own needs. Sometimes I'm a ravenous little monster, and how do I calm that down?

Q12: *Are you comfortable with your body?*

MIDDLEDITCH: I am, but I'm 37 now, and there are moments lately when I've been having body-image issues. Not many people talk about it being okay for a guy to want to feel sexy. Typically it's "Get fucking swole!" No, I want to look in the mirror and know that I have some semblance of a jaw line and feel confident. No one really talks about the fact that guys don't always feel that. It's okay for boys to want to feel pretty.

Q13: *You've said that you first had the experience of fans wanting to sleep with you as a Second City improv performer on cruise ships. Has that sort of attention increased?*

MIDDLEDITCH: Personally, that's one of the trickier elements of it all, because Mollie doesn't get that and yet she has to witness it. I'm like, "Come on, what about this chick who's obviously really into me?" And Mollie will say, "Yeah, she's into *you.* Where do *I* fit in?" That question comes up. There's a lot of negotiation, and adding fame sometimes makes it easier and sometimes complicates things.

That's the forever-changing landscape in our relationship, because it's about everybody feeling safe. The internet is a possibility for meeting people, but Instagram fucks up marriages. If your partner brings this very forward person from Instagram to you, you'll be like, "Do you guys have a thing?" Whereas if your partner bumps into someone and they start a conversation, it all happens in front of you. It's a game of inches on a minefield to try to predict who's going to feel safe. My first concern is Mollie. Anything that happens has to be run by the queen.

Q14: *You're a fan of The Bachelor and The Bachelorette. Explain that show's greatness to people who hate on it or who've never seen it.*

MIDDLEDITCH: The fun of it is thinking, What would I do? I always think about how utterly difficult it would be for me to survive in that house with all those alphas. Not that I'm not an alpha. I don't perceive myself as a beta or a submissive little bitch—or whatever the fuck betas are supposed to be. But who am I going to joke around with? Even though I know I'm funny and cool, would that person even look at me when compared to all the boneheads? My wife's like, "I think you'd fucking get voted off first," and I'm like, "Me too." [*laughs*]

Q15: *A 2018 Hollywood Reporter cover story featured the cast of Silicon Valley with the headline* TRIUMPH OF THE BETA MALE, *which led to a rant by Alex Jones about modern masculinity. How does it feel to piss off Jones?*

MIDDLEDITCH: Hilarious. I shot guns with him and my friend at this ranch in Texas maybe six years ago. This was before Infowars got big, and I didn't really know who he was. If I hadn't later learned that he constantly spews awful nonsense, I would have been like, "That guy was super nice." It made me think, Does he really believe all that shit? Because if he's really saying all that just to sell protein powder, he's a diabolical motherfucker. I'm so glad YouTube removed him. There should be more accountability. I don't want to censor everybody, but I want to fucking censor some.

Q16: *You were bullied growing up and have dealt with depression over the years. Is there still pain in that?*

MIDDLEDITCH: It's all part of the path. There were things that were painful, for sure, but I'd rather have that happen versus me being the aggressor. I was catching up with a hometown friend, and she said, "You were really mean to me when I was a kid." I was like, "I didn't even know—I'm so sorry. If only you knew I had a crush on you the whole time."

Q17: *How have success and fame changed the way you cope with those emotions?*

MIDDLEDITCH: Success has changed everything. Fame is something that guarantees change, even if I don't have *Pirates of the Caribbean* fame like Orlando Bloom. But there's no way to go through fame without it changing you. It's more about how you respond to it and how elastic you are—if you're able to go back to who you really are. Fame becomes dangerous only when you start believing the hype and believing you're a special person above the normal tier of people. And that's hard to avoid because of all the times you get to go to the front of the line. It's difficult not to think, Oh, I am totally special.

Q18: *How does fame affect friendships? You and your former co-star T.J. Miller were once close, right?*

MIDDLEDITCH: Everyone reacts differently to fame. It's a shame. T.J. is very funny. Whatever he's doing or whatever he wants to do, I wish him success. I'm not going to get into whatever happened. We just stopped seeing eye-to-eye. I'm not the only one he doesn't see eye-to-eye with.

Q19: *You're in Zombieland: Double Tap, out in October. Do you have the skills to survive a zombie apocalypse?*

MIDDLEDITCH: I'm an instrument-rated private pilot. I'd been wanting to fly since I was 14 or 15 years old, when I got into military history and aviation and PC flight simulators. So if you have a bunker in Montana, save me a bed. I'll get you there.

Q20: *Do you think the public knows the real you?*

MIDDLEDITCH: Look, I play a ton of video games, but there are other parts of me. There's going to hockey games and flying airplanes. There's a bit of a hippie in me, because I was raised in Nelson, British Columbia, a hippie town. As much as I enjoy spending an entire weekend playing computer games, I also like to take mushrooms and drink rainwater off a tree. It's all important. ■

THERE'S NO WAY TO GO THROUGH FAME WITHOUT IT CHANGING YOU.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
ALI MITTON

top down

OCTOBER PLAYMATE

Between nun school and New York City, Brazilian-born beauty and October Playmate **Hilda Dias Pimentel** has made the world her home—and good karma her crusade

I grew up in a Catholic family on the island of Vitoria in southeast Brazil. I was baptized, and as a kid I went to a nun school that instilled rigid values about sex, marriage and women's roles in society. I was impressionable back then, and it took years of independence to understand how those values impacted me.

Now, at 28, I don't follow any specific religion, but I respect everyone's beliefs. I believe in energy and karma; I believe we should strive to evolve ourselves, as I saw how religion can be used as a weapon of judgment instead of a force to unite us through compassion.

I don't know if you know any Brazilian families, but we're generally really tight, really loud and really in your face. I was a shy kid—the type who went straight home after school to make a glass of chocolate milk and lie in bed reading *Harry Potter*—but my family pushed me outside my shell. My mother was a teacher and a professional dancer, and she encouraged me to study ballet. By the time I was 14 I'd given it up; my teacher said I was too tall and it would be too difficult to find a partner who could lift me. I was disappointed, but my height turned out to be a blessing in disguise.

When I was 16, a group of international model scouts came to our city. I'd never had much interest in modeling, but my family kept saying, "You're super tall. You should do it!" I made it through two rounds of scouting, went to São Paulo in November with my mom, signed a contract—and in January I was in Milan.

Modeling forced me to grow up quickly. I had to learn a lot of new things, like transportation, cooking, handling money. (I ruined a bunch of loads of laundry before I learned to separate the colors.) I've been modeling for 12 years now, and I've lived throughout Europe and Asia, as well as South Africa, but five years ago I was like, "You know what? Nope! I can't do it anymore. I need a place where I can drop my luggage, breathe and have a couple of plants." I put down roots in New York and finally found some stability. I was grateful to sign with an excellent model-management company there. I recently moved in with my boyfriend, and I just signed up for a course in interior design at the New York Institute of Art and Design.

It took me years to unlearn the toxic thoughts I had about my body, and it's still a daily struggle. It wasn't until I started modeling nude that I was forced to let go of what I saw as flaws and embrace my work with more confidence. At this point in my career, I want to use this platform to empower young women.

I will never let people write me off as "just a model" and limit my potential—and neither should you, however you choose to spend your days. I want women to know they don't need approval from anybody but themselves.

Find your pleasure. Pursue it without fear. You are worthy.

It wasn't until I started modeling nude that I was forced to let go of what I saw as flaws.

RELATOS LIBÉRRIMOS
Me han confundido con alguien del PP
EL AVISADOR BATUECO

BIRTHPLACE: Vitoria, Brazil **CURRENT CITY:** New York, New York

ON MUSIC LESSONS

Music has always played an important role in my life. That's actually how I learned English: by listening to music and learning the pronunciation of English words. When I was eight years old, I would listen to Backstreet Boys and 'N Sync and sing the songs with no idea what I was saying.

ON WIZARDING

I was obsessed with Harry Potter as a teenager. I cried when Sirius Black died, I laughed when Harry was happy—it was the first time I actually felt emotions while reading. (What Hogwarts house would I be in? Gryffindor.)

ON PHOBIAS

I'm terrified of heights. If I'm at the top of a building and there's no handrail, I'm going to start sweating. I'm really clumsy, so I feel like if I trip and fall, I'm dead.

ON SELF-CARE

The best advice I've ever received? Don't try to fill everybody's cup and leave yours empty. If you want to help other people, you have to do the work on yourself first. Don't be afraid of what others will think of you. This is a lesson I constantly need to remind myself of.

ON SPARKING JOY

I became a freak about organizing things after I watched *Tidying Up With Marie Kondo*. I just got a ton of boxes from the Container Store, and now I'm in organizing heaven. I think when you're in a good environment, you can go about your day with a clear mind.

ON THE INDUSTRY

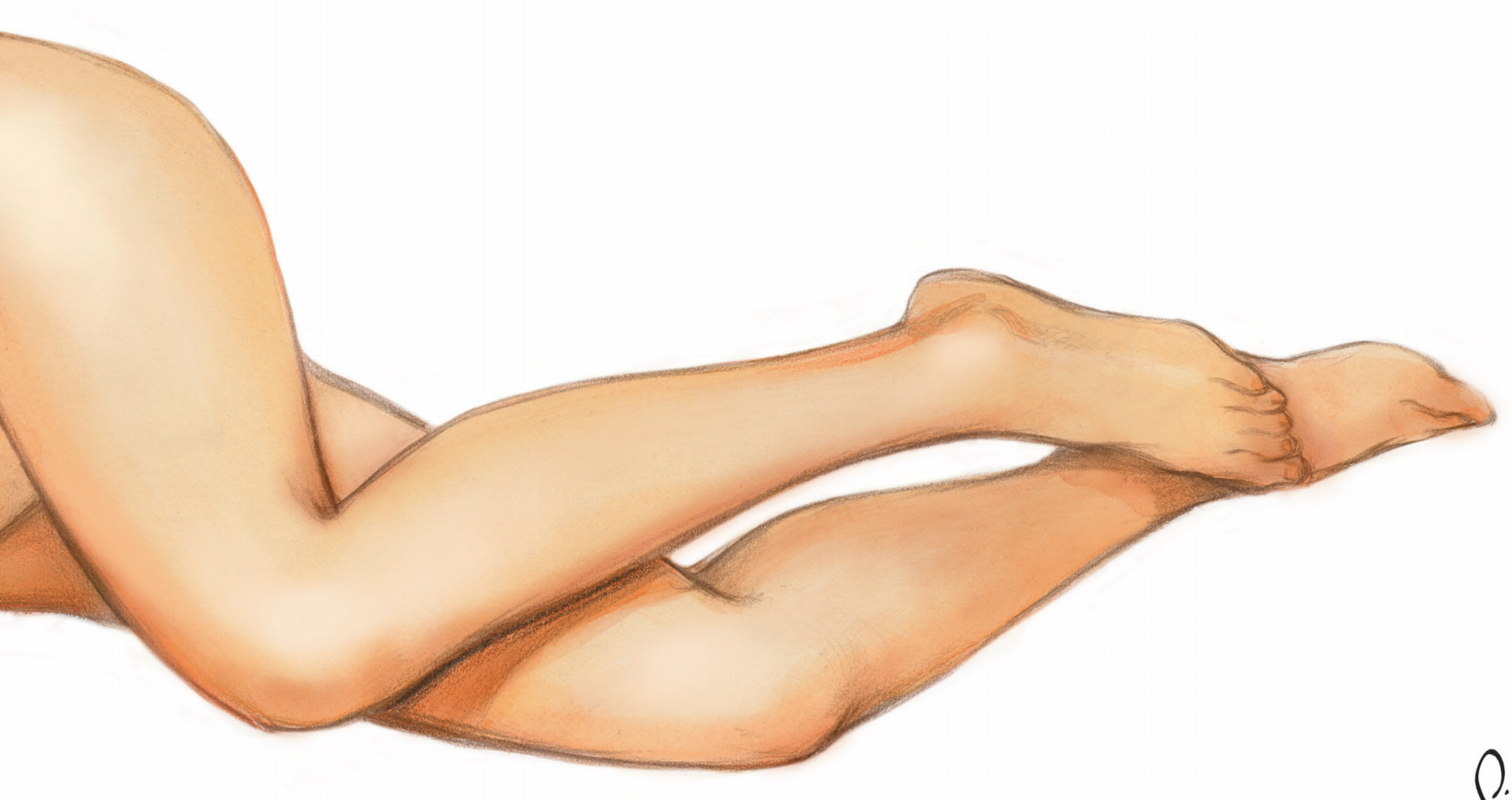
In the beginning of my career, beauty standards in the industry were much narrower. I was always being asked to pluck my eyebrows. They didn't like that I didn't have blue or green eyes, and I wasn't allowed to get a tan. Now it's much better. I've found a niche, and people are more open to unique traits. (They're loving my bushy eyebrows.) Overall I think beauty standards are still too rigorous, but I like that we're moving toward diversity, authenticity and self-love.

ON VITAL VOICES

If there's somebody I think more people should be listening to, it's Shaun King. We need to hear more voices in the realm of social justice. We need more companies and magazines to speak to the issues of our generation.

ON CELEBRITY CRUSHES

I love Keanu Reeves. He rides on the subway; he doesn't spend money on ridiculous things; his sister had leukemia and he's said to have donated millions of dollars for research. I think he's just down-to-earth.



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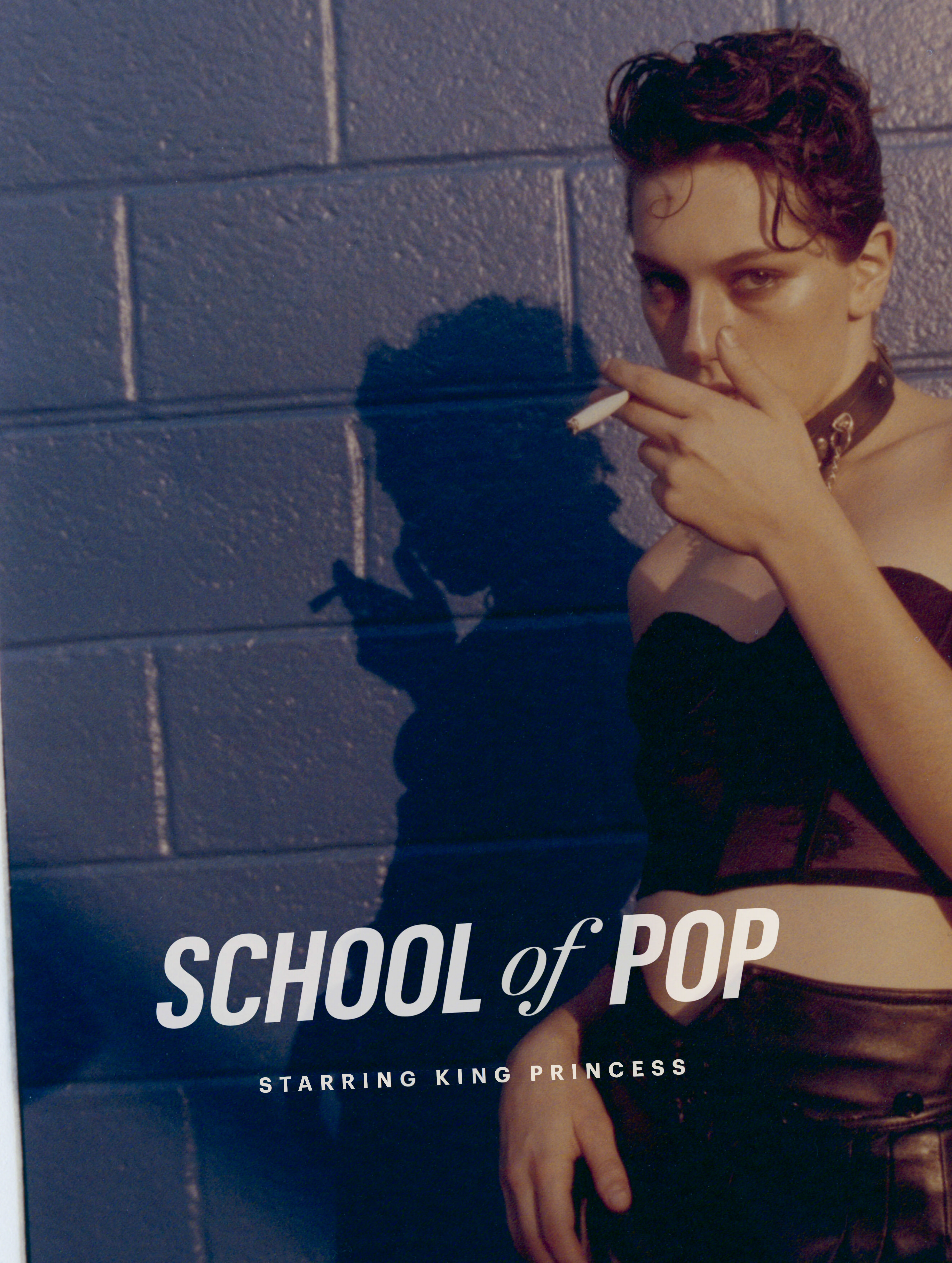
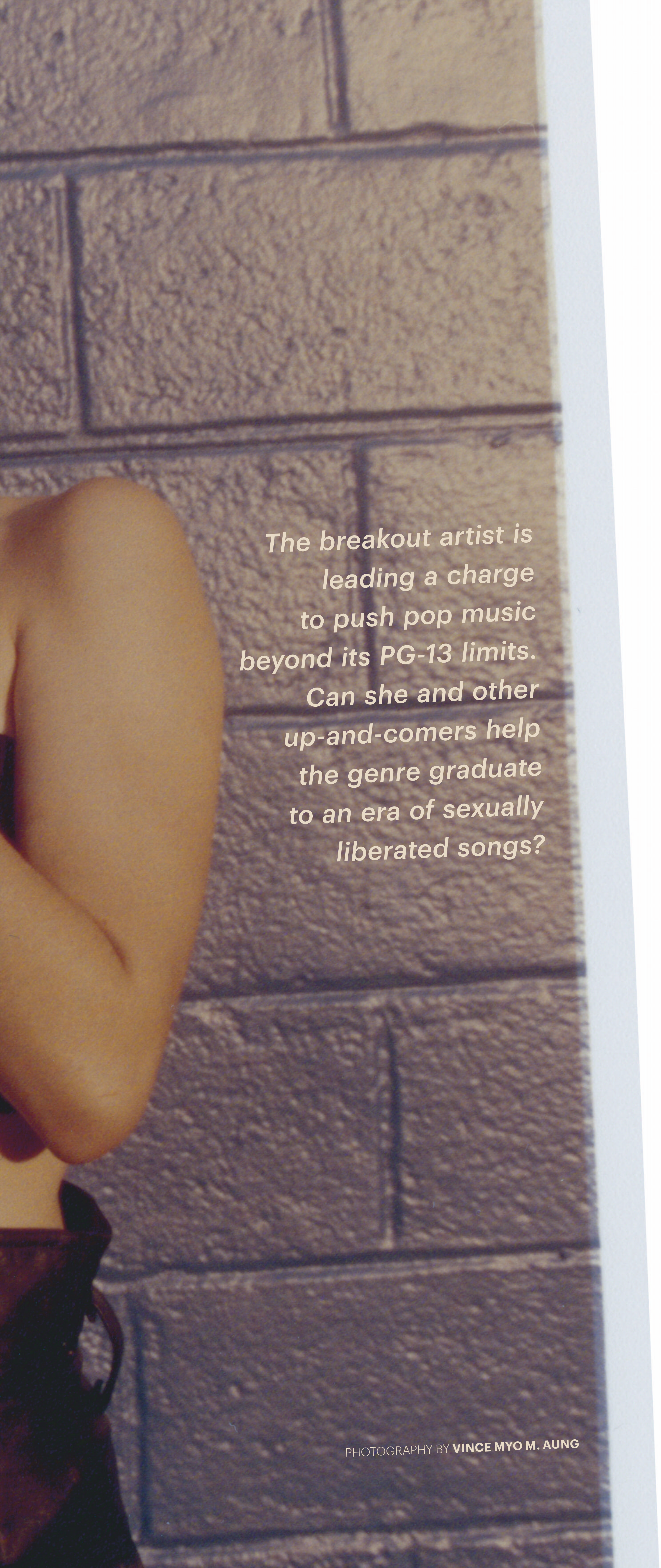


SCHOOL *of* POP

STARRING KING PRINCESS



The breakout artist is leading a charge to push pop music beyond its PG-13 limits. Can she and other up-and-comers help the genre graduate to an era of sexually liberated songs?

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **VINCE MYO M. AUNG**

BY **DOUGLAS GREENWOOD**

I just thought some pussy was bomb, and I wanted to write about it," King Princess tells me, seemingly shrugging off the power and defiance of "Pussy Is God," her breakout single that was universally hailed upon its late-2018 release. Vice called it "the sexy lesbian love song we've been waiting for"; Pitchfork praised it as "textbook pop, a catchy ode to a lover"; and Spin deemed it "a fully-formed pop song... brash and funny, delivered with a confidence and swagger."

"After we wrote it"—*we* refers to King Princess, born Mikaela Straus, and frequent co-producer and engineer Mike Malchicoff—"we realized that it was going to be jarring for some people." She's right: The sexual charge of "Pussy Is God" is blatant, loud and unashamed. Unlike chart-topping bops cloaked in corny double entendres (think Britney Spears's "If U Seek Amy" or Hailee Steinfeld's "Love Myself"), "Pussy Is God" has no hidden meaning. King Princess's songwriting is so literal, in fact, that listening to her music reminds one that sex, despite the cultural climate, should be uninhibited and fun: "Your pussy is God and I love it / Gonna kiss me real hard, make me want it."

Pop music has always worshipped at the altar of sex. Elvis Presley put conservative 1950s America in an orgasmic haze with his pelvic thrust. Madonna drew ire for singing about being "touched for the very first time" in a wedding dress. The Spice Girls achieved their iconic status when the group of five women suggested they "really, really, really wanna zig-a-zig ah," and Rihanna demanded that a lover "give it to me strong" on her 10th number one U.S. single.

But pop has rarely been overtly proud of sexuality, nor has it embraced its less romantic carnal realities. Burdened by Federal Communications Commission regulations, the genre has remained, since the reign of Madonna in the 1980s, statically cheeky, demure and—as displayed by performers from Dua Lipa to Taylor Swift—fascinated by independence, innocence and romance versus, well, pussy.

In the midst of pop culture's current fixation on rebelling against the patriarchy, King Princess is using the age-old truth that sex sells to deliver her own narrative—one

that is notably uncensored. Much of this creative freedom can be attributed to how streaming has shifted the industry. Despite her radio-unfriendly music, King Princess, who identifies as a genderqueer lesbian, has been able to win fans (and press attention) in the Wild West of Spotify and its competitors. "Pussy Is God," with its suggestion that cunnilingus is a form of prayer, glorifies sexual organs while mocking the oppressive nature of organized religion. Going down on a woman is like "praying for hours."

"[Pussy] holds powers that can't be understood," she says.

Her dissent is redolent of that of many other young artists, and even of Madonna, the Queen of Pop herself, but it would be foolish to ignore how King Princess's queerness has informed her perspectives on sex, eroticism and artistry. Though she was born to free-spirited parents (her father owns New York studio Mission Sound Recording; her mother had a career in fashion and worked as a civil rights activist), "the best sex education I got was through the media," she tells me. "My teachers talked about queerness and about shit that wouldn't have been talked about just a couple of years earlier, so I feel very lucky," she says of her relatively progressive high school. "That said, I didn't learn shit about my sexuality through those institutions. I wasn't exposed to queer content through the school system. It was more for straight people. The biggest issue was students getting pregnant."

King Princess is using the age-old truth that sex sells to deliver her own narrative—one that is notably uncensored.

At 20 years old, King Princess belongs to Generation Z—a demographic that, according to a 40-year study published in 2017 by the journal *Child Development,* is less interested in sex than earlier cohorts. Whether that's true or not, Planned Parenthood reports that 96 percent of parents in the United States believe their children should be taught about sex in high school. But state-sanctioned sex education—those hard-edged talks about erections, protection and puberty—remains conservative and noncomprehensive. According to the Guttmacher Institute, only 24 states and the District of Columbia mandate sex education in public schools; out of those 24 states, just nine require inclusive discussions of sexual orientation. Yet, in a survey from the University of New Hampshire, more than 70 percent of students said they had watched online porn by the time they were 18. Such statistics seem to support the position that today's youth are not receiving a proper education about sexual intercourse, let alone sexual pleasure.

Meanwhile, as music becomes more accessible, listenership is becoming harder to regulate. A 2018 study in the U.S. and the U.K. by research startup Streetbees found that 63 percent of Generation Z listens to music on Spotify, and 67 percent listens to music on free YouTube. Relatedly, a study conducted by Larry Miller, director of New York University's Steinhardt Music Business Program, reported that terrestrial-radio listening among teenagers decreased by 50 percent between 2005 and 2016, meaning a songwriter's reach is no longer beholden to the FCC, the organization that has long determined whether lyrics are too explicit for airplay and thus mass dissemination.

Emphasizing pop music's new sexual awakening are those mainstream female artists who are leveraging the cultural rise in sex positivity. Think Janelle Monáe (admittedly a crossover artist), who performed her viral hit song "Pynk" as part of a medley at the 2019 Grammys with backup dancers dressed in pants resembling labia. Another is Ariana Grande, who has made the *Billboard* top 10 by singing about how a sexual encounter left her "walking side to side" and that a man "can hit it in the mornin' / Yeah, yeah, like it's yours."

Thanks to streaming, the kids of Generation Z don't need a parent's permission to discover any artist, let alone the subversive ones. The postmillennial generations may be the first to enjoy that freedom. Millennials, after all, sometimes needed an adult 18 years or older to purchase an album the Recording Industry Association of America had slapped with a "parental advisory." Before that, MTV practiced its dominance over what people listened to by banishing steamy videos to late night—or off the network altogether.

Couple a broken sex-education system with the internet's vast reserves of sexual material, and young people are left with few role models who responsibly preach the benefits of sex positivity, consent and self-pleasure without sacrificing their artistry or sexual identity. This is why the rise of sexually expressive pop artists is worth paying attention to. King Princess's songs feel intimate and educational, and some are even uncomfortable. But they also feel organic versus contrived or salacious for the sake of controversy. Her sexually charged 2018 debut track, "1950," is another lustrous ode to queer love, inspired by author Patricia Highsmith's *The Price of Salt,* the novel adapted into the acclaimed 2015 lesbian film *Carol.* "I hate it when dudes try to chase me," coos King Princess in a coiling metaphor for the way both queer and unrequited love carry the same suppressed and confusing codes. "I love it when we play 1950."

An impromptu tweet of her lyrics by Harry Styles introduced King Princess to a massive online audience in March 2018. Grammy-winning superproducer Mark Ronson took notice and later signed her to his label, Zelig Records, at which point she became a queer superhero. In addition to appearing on Ronson's latest album, *Late Night Feelings,* she has also collaborated with Fiona Apple.

Her success forces the question: What responsibility do musicians have regarding their unprecedented access to younger listeners? And how does that power contend with pop culture's historical preference for censoring sexuality through euphemism? Is it detrimental for the sexually inexperienced to listen to, say, Tove Lo sing about lady wood

Miss Highness

CLASS OF 1950

("Dirty on the inside, damaged goods with nothing but pride / Yeah, you give me wood / Give me lady wood") while being taught that abstinence is the best form of protection?

"To learn through the lyrics of a song, the media or the internet helps young people discover the culture they came from," says Amelia Abraham, author of *Queer Intentions: A (Personal) Journey Through LGBTQ+ Culture*. "If you're not taught by your parents or in sex education in school about your culture and history, then where are you going to learn about it?"

King Princess isn't the only female pop artist tearing up taboos and inspiring an age of sexual discovery within pop. The meteoric rise of Lizzo, and her cross-genre appeal, is tied to her professions of self-love and sexual pride. And the 23-year-old bisexual singer-songwriter Slayyyter, born Catherine Slater, has gained a sizable fan base by releasing hypersexual music online. "Boy, can you eat me right?" she asks over scuzzy electronic beats in "Candy," released in September 2018. Her spin on Mariah Carey's holiday classic "All I Want for Christmas" is no less matter-of-fact: "All I want for Christmas is to get fucked / Take a big hit, get my tits sucked," the chorus repeats.

A former sex worker, Slayyyter makes music in her bedroom. Earlier this year, she went viral after teasing 14 seconds of her song "Mine" on Twitter. "I didn't know your name, boy / I fell in love / First kiss, your lips drove me insane, boy," she sings, adding living proof that sexually liberated artists can rise from obscurity without simultaneously commercializing and diminishing sex for radio spins.

"I have always been a very sex-positive person, but as a former sex worker, it's something that comes naturally to me," Slayyyter tells PLAYBOY. While her approach to sex is imperative to her success, Slayyyter wants people to know her sexuality isn't a shtick. An independent artist, she remains in charge of her body and her sound. "I recently saw someone on Twitter say my brand is 'Being a Whore,'" she says. "It ticked me off, because I don't think of it as that. It's just who I am."

No surprise, a lesson on owning one's sexual identity is not included among the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's "19 Critical Sexual Education Topics," an online learning aid meant to inform sex-education curricula. Intimacy and pleasure are similarly ignored. Considering that humans have been fornicating for pleasure's sake for eternity—and that sex has consumed adolescence for just as long—it's strange to think we're still reckoning with improper education and debates about sexuality. The breakthrough pop stars of 2018 and 2019 seem to be recognizing an opportunity, and their success isn't dependent on an industry that for decades has manufactured and rewarded hypersexualized but hollow pop stars and catalogs of euphemistic songs. Pop stars can now be sexy, sex positive and sexually explicit. But this isn't just about pussy. It's a generational awakening. ■

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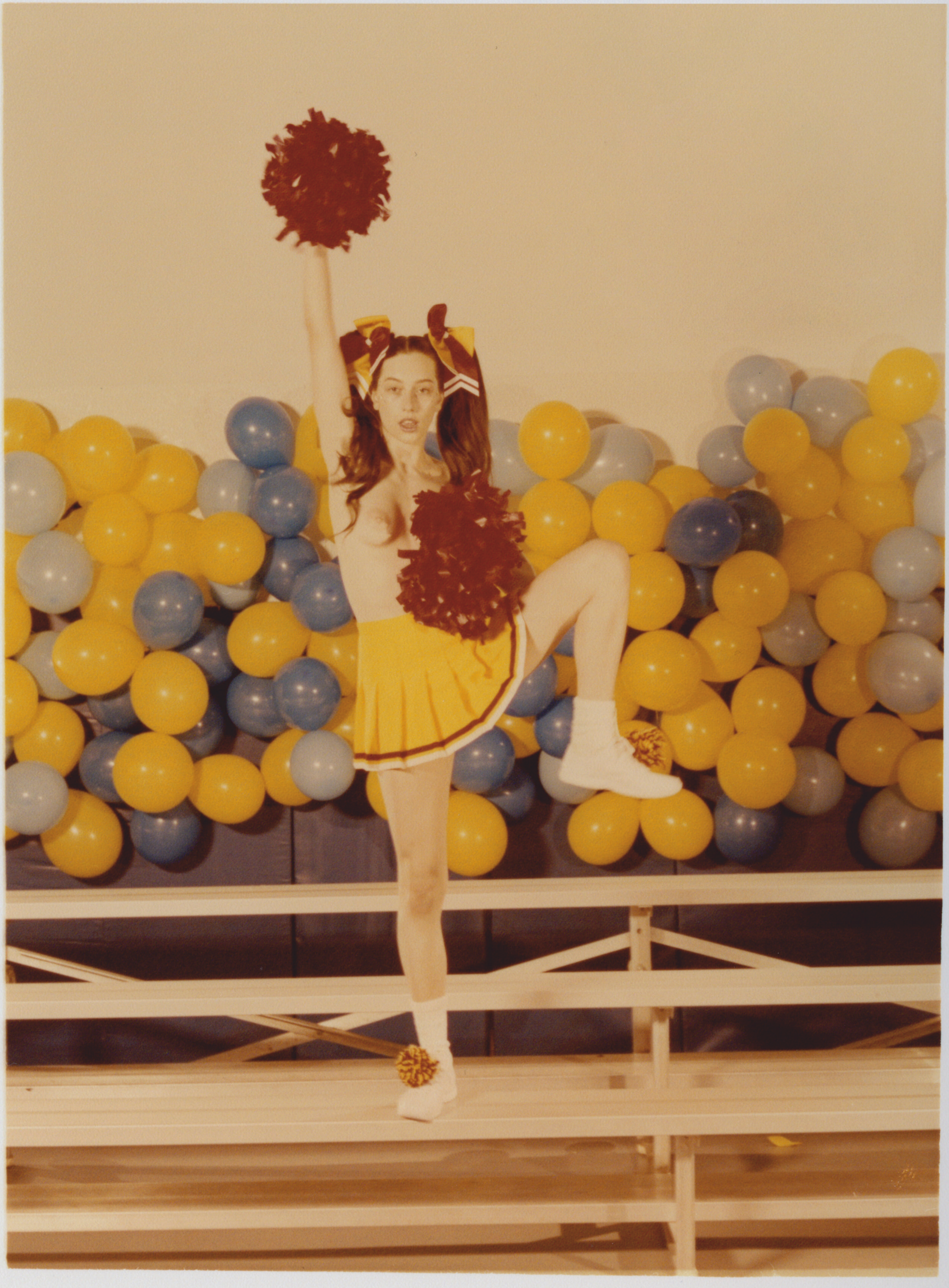


doctor *fuck*

ILLUSTRATIONS BY **JOYCE LEE**

A writer joins Ashley Madison for a story and accidentally connects with her ob-gyn. A years-long cat-and-mouse game ensues, leading to some raw insights into post-#MeToo justice

BY **LISA TADDEO**

There are few things crueler than eating White Castle sliders in front of a starving dog late at night. There are few things more grossly unattractive than eating those uniquely fragrant hamburgers while texting with a man who is not your husband, about meeting for sex in the sort of hotels that look nice on the internet but in person are furnished with stained comforters damp with fuck sweat.

In 2011 I wrote a story about Ashley Madison, the site for married people looking to have affairs. I created a profile with a picture of myself taken on Halloween—I'm wearing a peacock costume with blue and yellow feathers, my face bright green and red. Hot, for a bird. I went on dates with married men. At a rococo caviar joint I ordered golden osetra while a young man showed me pictures of his son playing soccer. Another pressed his palm against my thigh at a whiskey bar, lamenting that he had always wanted porterhouse on the grill in an apartment overlooking the park, until he'd finally achieved porterhouse on the grill in an apartment overlooking the park. Did I understand?

I was bored by the dates, the pimento olives. It was easier and more interesting to talk over e-mail, to dangle the idea of meeting but never do it. That way the men exposed more of themselves and tried to calibrate their sexual energy according to my fear. I had never before experienced having my timorousness attended to in that way. On top of that, I could eat previously frozen White Castle sliders while I fucked with their heads and they played with their dicks.

One night I sat down with my computer. I had recently lost my mother, and talking to strangers was a noncommittal balm, like arnica. I talked for a while to a man kind of named Jeff, who worked nearby. His picture looked familiar but only because it was white and doughy and I lived in a part of the world that rested on the dough of white men.

The others I'd been speaking to seemed unsure; Jeff was confident, aggressive. His manner annoyed me, but it was good for the story.

When we switched over to e-mail, I was shocked by two things—first, that he was using his actual daytime e-mail, his full name showing when my cursor hovered over the handle (the classic Sports Team + Year I Was Born formula). Second, that he was my gynecologist.

It had been several months earlier, weeks after my mother's death, that I'd gone to a new doctor for my annual gynecological exam. He made a joke about not using gloves. I don't remember if I laughed. I might have. I could say I was grief-stricken, which is true, but I'd allowed plenty of other trespasses like that before I'd experienced any loss.

A week or so later the office called with my results. I required a colposcopy, a procedure meant to biopsy malignant or precancerous cells, which led to the doctor removing those abnormal cells in the same visit. Right before I went into his tiny surgical room, I asked about the risks, and he replied, excitedly, "Well, you might never be able to have kids." He was genuinely pleased to make the joke. The toady smile and the large grim hands. He should have been holding a Solo cup in a fraternity cellar and not a scalpel in an operating room. I bet I smiled back.

After the procedure I was in terrific pain and hemorrhaged mahogany blood for days. Another gynecologist fixed it and called the original surgeon a barbarian. It was more painful than my recovery from the emergency cesarean I underwent years later when, luckily, I was still able to bear a child.

Now there I was, looking at my screen, realizing that the man who was asking me where I liked to ski and fantasizing about how sexy it would be if we accidentally bumped into one another on the slopes while our unsuspecting families waited in the lodge was the man who had disfigured my insides.

I spent much of the following eight years researching, for a book, the ways in which female desire is denied. I was so embedded within female desire that I'd nearly forgotten about the male desire that had shaped my teens and most of my 20s. Shortly after the book was completed, I was going through my old e-mail account and found the correspondence with Dr. Jeff. With the exception of the odd cocktail-party retelling, I'd stopped thinking about him. But he had not stopped thinking about me. He'd been sporadically e-mailing me, or rather the peacock cipher I'd called Natali, the whole time:

Hey sexy it has been a long time. How are you?

It's been years Natali!

Friday after work?

Looking him up on the internet, I found dozens of terrible

MY HUSBAND AVERTED HIS EYES AS I WROTE, *STUCK IN TRAFFIC, CAN'T WAIT TO FINALLY DO THIS THING. I'M WET AF.*

reviews of his practice, and of him. A number of patients talked about his unscrupulousness, the way he delivered abysmal results with laughter, the way he joked about the inanity of one woman trying to keep her gown closed when he would be seeing it all within moments anyway, while she was under anesthesia. All of it aligned with everything I'd experienced as Dr. Jeff's patient. Plus his greed, reprehensible for a doctor—the way he stuck his head out of his office to insert himself into billing questions. I began to consider how perhaps I hadn't needed that painful procedure. How I hadn't needed to bleed for days. How I might have suffered that pain just so this man could make a few thousand dollars. This man who at night was trying to see the very nether regions he had ruptured during the day.

I felt powerless and didn't want to feel that way anymore. So I wrote to him. From that old e-mail I dusted off my ability to flirt and typed, *Hello Jeff, remind me why we never met.*

He wrote back within the hour. He lived in an affluent town. I told him I lived nearby. We could meet at a hideout in between.

I feel indescribably insane describing what transpired over the following weeks. We moved from e-mail to Snapchat to text. Mainly the conversations were staid, about where to meet and when. I sailed our exchanges, several times, into pornographic waters. One week I said it would be "hard" to meet. I sent a meme of a hot redhead with side boob, twerking.

Over a few months I stood him up several times. Once was at a Brazilian bar with colored lights hung from the ceiling and loud college kids getting two-for-ones. He drank caipirinhas and sent me messages that turned surly. Another time, he waited at his favorite caviar spot with a tier of Siberian hybrid while I celebrated my husband's birthday in Tahoe. I took breaks from our meal to text with Dr. Jeff. My husband averted his eyes as I wrote, *Stuck in traffic, can't wait to finally do this thing. I'm wet AF.*

• • •

Dr. Jeff forgave me my trespasses. I always had a good excuse—work, fear of being caught, traffic—and he always had a hard dick. He told me so. He told me he woke up with one after dreaming of me. He told me he couldn't concentrate at work. I suppose he was looking at other women's spread legs and thinking of mine. Which in fact he'd already seen! How meta.

In between our missed connections, we engaged in stimulating conversation. Once, I wrote, *I like it from behind; I like to be animalistic.* Another time he texted me the link to one of his favorite clips from a free website. The video was exceedingly pixelated. I wrote, *Does it turn you on that it's so low quality?* I wanted to make him feel a certain way. He replied that he liked that it felt like real people.

Other times I tried to price him out of a sexual relationship with me. During a lube interlude, I sent him the link to one that I'd gotten in a swag bag, at $34 a tube. Nice, he said, but it's water-based, so ultimately it dries. He came back at me with a CBD lube at $20 a bottle. He made me feel immature, unsophisticated in the parlance of infidelity. He also didn't balk when I suggested we meet at one of the most expensive hotels in the country. When I didn't show after half an hour, he wrote, *You kind of suck right now.* And then, *But I think you know that already.* I texted him an hour after my promised arrival. One of my children was sick and I had to get home right away. Then I wrote, *I don't really like being told I suck. I get that it's been hard to meet.*

Around that time he sent a picture of himself smiling, as though he thought I'd enjoy it. He was paunchier than I recalled. I found everything about his expression and his haircut despicable.

• • •

One day, unprompted, Dr. Jeff wrote, *Did I ever tell you what I do for work?*

No, I said. *No, you did not.*

He didn't follow that up.

I thought of the other women he might be emotionally assaulting with his gloveless jokes. I thought about doing something. But what was there to do? Add another Yelp review to the fray? I might have used my journalistic resources to out him, but to out him as what—a scumbag? I thought about his child and his wife, whom I'd seen on Facebook. I saw photos of a vacation in Italy. I saw the child doing the classic pose with the Leaning Tower of Pisa. In my book about the desire of women, I wrote about a teacher of the year who'd had an alleged relationship with one of his students. Using his real name gave me pause, but he was already a public figure. Still, I often imagined his wife reading the details that hadn't been part of the trial. Even though multiple people close to the case told me she'd likely been complicit in the end, had likely perjured herself, I couldn't help imagining her pain and my part in inflicting it.

On top of that, and to the extent that #MeToo factors into my relationship with my former doctor, what I hope to impart to my four-year-old daughter is not to act from a stance of persecution but from one of *pursuit*.

Mary Gaitskill, in her collection of essays, *Somebody With a Little Hammer,* has a remarkable piece about the times she's been raped. She writes that the one that affected her the most was not the violent rape by a stranger but the two quasi–date rapes, wherein she felt she had some agency and didn't use it. I think, as women, we feel the worst when we've rendered our own selves powerless. When we have abdicated that power to assholes. I've seen a lot of the subjects of my book—and friends, and myself—either keep quiet about the events that wound us or talk about those events without nuance. Someone is an aggressor. Someone else is a victim. I've wondered, over this past decade of research and suturing the rips of my past, how I might act from a different plane. How I might exercise agency without claiming victimhood. How I might "win."

But with Dr. Jeff I don't think I've been doing that. I think I've been failing in all the ways I don't want my daughter to fail. I don't have an endgame in sight. As my long-suffering husband has said, "What in the fuck are you doing?"

A corollary to my self-perceived failure—and potentially the most disheartening feeling I can imagine—is my fear. The very bald fear that has made my peacock soul feel plucked. The fear that comes from imagining meeting this man in person, again. The very idea of seeing this person who once made me feel so violated. And even more frightening and awful and untenable than that—the vagabond, loathsome fear that he would not think I was *cool.* That I had not played by the infidelity rules. That I was not cool enough to keep my mouth shut. That I was *not fucking cool.* Can you believe that? What in the gloveless fuck *am* I doing?

• • •

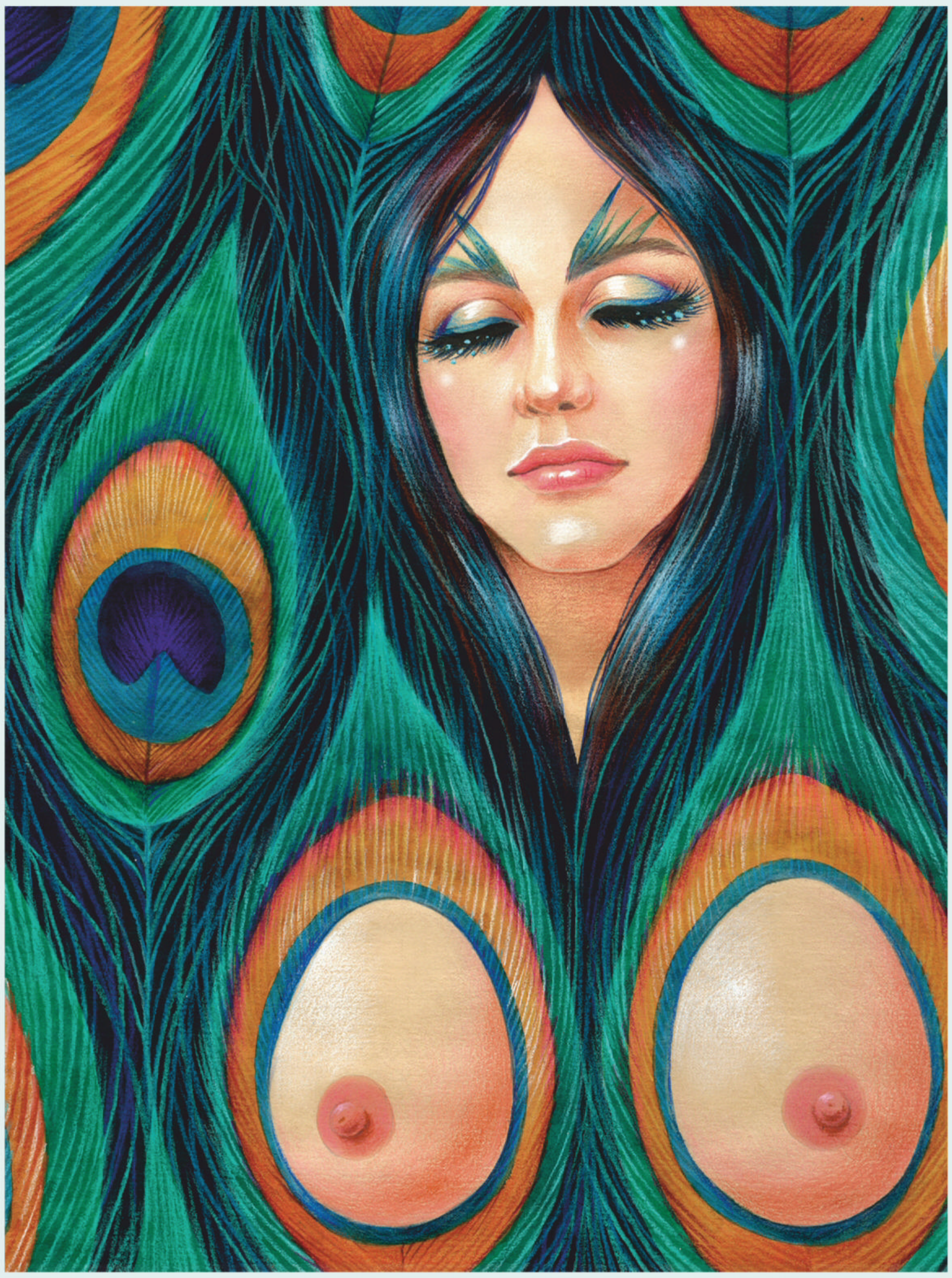
Several days ago, Dr. Jeff and I were supposed to meet for the eighth time. As usual, I had no intention of going. But I worried we were getting to the precipice of his patience. He claimed to be fucking other women. He did bumps of yayo during the day. His job was such that he could make his own schedule. Schedule surgeries around bumps and fucks. He could meet me anywhere at nearly any time. (As far as his wife was concerned, he'd told me numerous times that he was very careful, with manifold excuses for leaving the house at all surgical hours.) But I was elusive, scared of being caught. I was too much the primary caregiver of my children, too micromanaged by my boss.

But then the most wonderful thing happened. Dr. Jeff canceled on *me.* His wife had purchased tickets to a deluxe chili event. Chili and vinho verde and whatever else did not go with chili and rows upon rows of banquet tables. Demure little plastic plates with chili from across the country. Cincinnati style, Texas red, lentil chili, coconut chili, black bean chili, white bean chili, Caribbean chili, chocolate chili and chili verde—perhaps that one goes with vinho verde.

The tickets were expensive for a chili tasting, and the outdoor venue was thick with cliché—polo shirts, frat faces, Hawaiian prints, sunglasses at night. There were pink clouds at sunset, incels spinning roulette wheels at casino tables with no money or prizes to win. There was house music, 1990s music, chili burps, overstuffed garbage cans. There was, in a corner by a speaker, the saddest woman ever to hold a volcano drink. How could I know all this? I know it because I was there. On my father's birthday—my father who was a doctor himself and who, had he still been alive, would never have let me undergo that surgery without a second opinion—I forced my husband to come with me and find my doctor at a chili fest in a stinking venue under sloppy white tents.

We parked in a muddy field. We walked half a mile to a long line of sweaty ticket holders. I cut the line because I was afraid of missing him. My husband waited at the end of it because he's of the opinion that a man who cuts a line could and should get beaten up. I ate two mini plates of chili before he caught up with me. We scanned the room, and he said it was too crowded. I would never find my man. After an unreasonably short time, my husband grew bored and went to sit by the constellation of Jaguars under a black tent with black couches and Veuve Clicquot and brochures.

Within minutes of searching alone, I found Dr. Jeff. At first I saw him from behind, in a too-long T-shirt and



frayed, womanly jeans. I recognized immediately the short trunk of his neck, the douchebag lean of his sagging frame. And then he turned. It was magnificently haunting to see that face, the face of a man no woman (I could ever imagine) wants to fuck. He scanned the crowd, his roving, rye-colored eyes giving off the revolving glow of a lighthouse. Beside him was the wife with the blown-out hair, the nice-enough wrap dress, the unsuspecting hand that holds the elbow of the stocky cheating pig.

I realized it had been easy to find him because of the way he was looking for something. He chewed a chili-stuffed tortilla with his mouth open. What was he looking for? It wasn't "hard" to surmise. A woman to bang. An ass to appraise. There were young women in short black shorts and black halter tops, pouring shit wine and slinging leaky chili with gloveless hands. My doctor's eyes found their thighs. I've always wondered if gynecologists tire of what lies between the legs. I was positive this one had not.

After that first sighting, I let him go. Because he was with his wife and because I knew I could find him again and again. I felt psychically connected. I knew him so well. All the hotels we hadn't been to, all the bars at which we hadn't gotten drinks. All the porn and lube he liked and all the ways in which he liked to fuck and all the ways in which he humiliated his patients and lied to his wife. All the vacations and the food and the political views. (Nearly more shocking than finding out my former doctor was pursuing my cipher was discovering the Fox News–grade political memes on his Facebook feed.) I knew I could find him again because I knew what he was looking for. The more important question I found myself asking, in that swirl of undercooked chili and flabby golfing arms, was, What was *I* looking for?

• • •

I found him again, and at last I walked toward him. It has always been easy for me to squeeze through crowds. I'm smallish and vehement. Moving through Chili Fest, I was reminded of the night I had gone to a club on the storied shores of New Jersey, trying to interview Samantha Ronson, who was guest deejaying that hot summer night and had just started a relationship with Lindsay Lohan, who was also there, in the booth, the two of them like miniature goddesses of strobes and men in tank tops. I was carrying a record—Guns N' Roses' *Appetite for Destruction*—because Ronson was a fan. As I moved through the moist crowd, a tank top spilled his vodka cranberry on my shoulder and licked it off me. I was pressed between walls of flesh. I didn't know what to do. I think I fucking smiled. Moving through the crowds of Chili Fest, I was also reminded of the orange day in Puerto Rico when I was 11 and on a family vacation and my overprotective parents had allowed me to take a walk down the beach. I lay on the sand, slathered in baby oil, Stephen King's *The Stand* covering my eyes against the godless Puerto Rico sun. And I awoke to a man licking my arm, to whom I said "Excuse me" as though I'd interrupted his business phone call.

There was cigar smoke in that Chili Fest crowd, men in their 50s with their counterfeit Cubans; the smoke reminded me that I miss cigars but not the men who gave them to me in bars I thought were fancy, with bargain marble and shiny mahogany.

I WINKED AT MY DOCTOR. THEN I GRITTED MY TEETH LIKE A FUCKING PSYCHO.

I don't miss the nights I acted like the bottle girls I wrote about; only I wasn't getting Louboutins and weekends in St. Barts but Ashton Classics and bearded licks, thigh touches. I stroked egos for no fucking reason.

I got to him. Three feet away. I looked at my phone and licked my lips until he looked at me. Like most women, I've always been able to feel a man's eyes. I straightened my back and touched the nape of my neck. Stretching, I've learned, means to some men that I'm DTF. I did all the things I'd seen women do in movies when I was a little girl. I did everything to look like a woman who wants to fuck a random mottled stranger and not like the girl who'd been ripped apart a decade ago.

He looked at me. We made eye contact, after all these years.

Songs of my past—"Bitter Sweet Symphony," "The Sign," "Losing My Religion," "Creep"—were bouncing from the loudspeakers under that stretched-out dirty cloud of a tent. I looked around the wasteland to the soundtrack of my 20s, a decade in which I'd lost my parents, my aunt and uncle, my grandparents, my fucking dog.

I looked around at the ghosts of the men who populated the remainder of that haunted decade. Neon glasses. Yankees caps. Acqua di Gio. Tennis sweat. Mike's Hard Lemonade. The unfuckable faces. Cigar smoke. The ones watching as I danced on bars, fatherless and always looking for something. The Bermuda shorts. The men who didn't call me. The men who called too much. There's his fucking face again. The food trucks. Opium at frat parties. Special K with a dude in my dorm who I thought was gay. A first date at the Korova Milk Bar, my nipple tweaked as I drank a white Russian. The man in Puerto Rico.

"Shut Up and Dance" came on. I fucking love that song. There was his face again. His fuck o'clock shadow. His hands that had been inside me. Ripping. His eyes, small, and the big tits on this other woman he's looking at. Someone grabbed me by my arm. I thought it was him. Even though I was looking at his face I was imagining his arms winding around me. Imagining he had come to say, *I know what you're doing. You didn't respect the code. There is a fucking code. You were supposed to be cool. You said you were cool. You told us all you were cool. In Puerto Rico you were cool; in New Jersey you were cool. Your parents are dead, but I am still alive. I know you. I see you. You might never have children.*

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It was my husband grabbing my arm.

"Come on," he said, "let it go."

What the fuck was I looking for?

And I realized. Not to be fucking dramatic, because that's not cool. But what I was looking for was me, who I am now, who I still really am not, after writing a book about women, after listening to them tell me about the wounds they suffered, the same ones I have suffered. I'm looking for who I want my daughter to be. Not a fucking cool girl. Not a stroker of egos. Not a woman who talks to strangers on trains and planes and on ginger beaches when she wants to read or sleep or cry. I haven't come here to destroy this man's life but to—oh, God help me for saying it like this—save mine.

I smiled at my doctor. I blinked both my eyes like the student in the classroom who is in love with Indiana Jones. He smiled back. He looked like he recognized me. The peacock with a vagina on his operating table. Perhaps he did. My husband's hand on my arm. Pulling me. I winked at my doctor again. I licked my lips. He kept smiling. Then I gritted my teeth like a fucking psycho. Like a cat about to hiss, the way I hiss at my daughter when she's being a dick, the way she hisses back at me because she is.

He looked shocked. I smiled again. My husband pulled me toward the exit. I think he was scared, as finally I was not. On the way out was a table stacked with giant wiener schnitzels. Sick of chili, I took one from a hot brunette and ate it like an animal, in front of whichever dogs were watching. We walked to the muddy field and got into the car and I went home to my kid.

Editor's note: Some names, locations and details have been changed for the sake of anonymity.

HIGH DINING

THE COUNTRY'S FIRST FINE-DINING CANNABIS RESTAURANT IS SURE TO LIGHT UP LOS ANGELES. BUT WILL THE ACTIVISM THAT CHEF ANDREA DRUMMER INFUSES INTO EVERY BITE TRANSFORM THE INDUSTRY?

BY **MICHELLE LHOOQ**

“ADVOCACY AND CANNABIS—THEY GO HAND IN HAND.”

Chef Andrea Drummer puts the final touches on a fried-chicken sandwich while her sous-chef flits around the kitchen, popping ingredients into the fryer. “This brine is nice,” Drummer says, taking a bite of a pickle. “But see this?” She pokes at the bread collapsing under the weight of coleslaw and the hunk of meat. “This should never happen.” She turns to me and sighs. “This sandwich needs more work.”

It’s a scene like countless others in the tense, giddy lead-up to a restaurant’s opening night—but the establishment in this case is Lowell Farms: A Cannabis Café, the first legal cannabis restaurant in the United States. “It’s intimidating,” the 47-year-old chef confesses.

In the stuffy kitchen of the under-construction site in West Hollywood, California, Drummer has been experimenting all week in preparation for the fall opening. Despite the pressure, she appears calm and focused as she stands by the stove in a dark denim apron, a red bandanna holding her hair and beaded bracelets decorating her wrists.

“There are a lot of eyes on me,” Drummer says softly over the din of carpenters and kitchen fans. “I want to do right by everyone.”

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The restaurant, co-owned by cannabis cultivators Lowell Herb Co., marks a shift in an industry hoping to appeal to a market that includes college kids as well as their parents and grandparents—and an industry with a long history of racial tensions and high incarceration rates. Eleven states have legalized recreational marijuana use since 2012, and though the industry raked in a total of $10.4 billion in 2018 and is projected to be worth $32 billion globally by 2022, there’s still plenty of room for social integration. And that’s just what this fine-dining experience offers.

Residents of those 11 states may be open to cannabis consumption but turned off by the common perception of legal bud culture: going to a dispensary where young stoners present you with overpriced pre-rolls; returning home to sit in front of your television and giggle for no reason. But “we all eat,” Drummer notes. “I think it’s important to engage with cannabis the same way a person does when they go out for martinis.” The Lowell café will not serve alcohol, so the restaurant will be a pioneering experiment in which cannabis is the main social lubricant—testing Drummer’s theory that sharing a meal and getting high are both communal experiences that have the power to help people connect.

When the eatery opens this fall, cannabis sommeliers will tend to each dining party to suggest food and strain pairings based on individual preferences. Diners will then have the option of enjoying joints or vaporizers before and during their meal. “We’re trying to focus on the idea that it’s going to be approachable for many different people, so the entire place will have overgrown living walls—very aromatic, very lush,” says restaurant director Kevin Brady, who goes on to praise Drummer’s attention to detail and longtime contributions to the Lowell brand. “Andrea has been partnered with Lowell from the beginning, when we petitioned the city for a license [in 2016],” he says.

Drummer carefully considers how each strain pairs with a given dish. “I think of the cannabis as I would rosemary or mint—the flavor profile, the notes, if the strain is more pungent or more mild,” she says. “It’s very farm-to-table in every respect, with our food and with the bud.” She goes on to explain how she’ll create dishes to complement both the flavors and the psychoactive effects of whatever strain is “in season.” Blue Dream, for example, pairs well with sweet and savory dishes alike due to its mild flavor and notes of blueberry. Drummer adds that the strain elicits an uplifting high that you might associate with dessert, so she’s thinking about pairing it with cereal-milk ice cream sandwiches. She’s also creating dishes with stronger flavors: “When you consume cannabis, your senses are heightened, so the food’s flavor profile is very forward. It’s not a muted palate.”

Drummer views the Lowell café as her opportunity to elevate cannabis-food pairing into a culinary art—and to eventually bring cannabis-infused concoctions to the menu. The café had initially planned to serve Drummer’s gourmet edibles, but current laws forced the company to pivot. “The state legislature is still formulating its policy around cannabis infusions. It’s unclear, and we’d rather take the conservative approach,” Brady says, noting that prepackaged edibles will be available for purchase. “We’re still working to figure out what those next steps look like.”

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **KANYA IWANA**

While the market for legal edibles—think gummies and brownies—has more than doubled since 2011, the products are extremely difficult to regulate. Dosages are unpredictable, and potential toxins have reportedly come up as a result of extraction technology. Meanwhile, the underground cannabis dinner events that continue to appear throughout the country come with problems of their own: A seat at the table can cost more than $100, and the addition of cannabis can feel like a profit-grubbing afterthought. Still, Drummer notes, compared with the combination of alcohol and food, “cannabis is kinder” if it’s done right. When she cooks with cannabis, she often finds herself listening from the kitchen for a shift in tone once the effects hit her diners. “I hear the cadence go up in such a beautiful way,” she says. “It’s like a symphony.”

But even Drummer had to be convinced of the powers of the bud. “I grew up in the South, where there are certain things you don’t talk about, and that influenced the direction of my career initially,” she says. Raised in a strict Baptist family in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, she was fascinated with food from an early age but thought everyone who indulged in cannabis was lazy. Ironically, she worked as a “very anti-cannabis” drug counselor from 1997 until 2005. It wasn’t until she moved to California in late 2007 that her mind changed: Drummer found herself working for a weed-friendly attorney who proved that people who partake can be successful. When she later suffered from sciatica, the near-instant back relief cannabis offered meant she could pursue her passion as a professional chef. In 2009 she enrolled at Le Cordon Bleu College of Culinary Arts in Pasadena, and by 2012 she’d founded her cannabis dinner service, Elevation VIP Cooperative. “It liberated me,” she says of her career pivot.

The Lowell Herb Co. team met Drummer at an event in 2016. The brand was impressed by Drummer’s experience under celebrity chefs such as Thomas Keller of the French Laundry. Her work as an outspoken cannabis advocate sealed the deal. “Advocacy and cannabis—they go hand in hand,” Drummer says. During our conversation over the hot (and getting hotter) stove, she points to the company’s social-equity programs, such as last year’s billboards in downtown Los Angeles that advertised jobs for nonviolent cannabis offenders.

“What was important to me was the team they assembled and how diverse it was,” said Drummer at a UCLA “Being Black in Cannabis” panel in February, citing the company’s hiring practices. “They didn’t just offer me a job,” she added. “They offered me a partnership.”

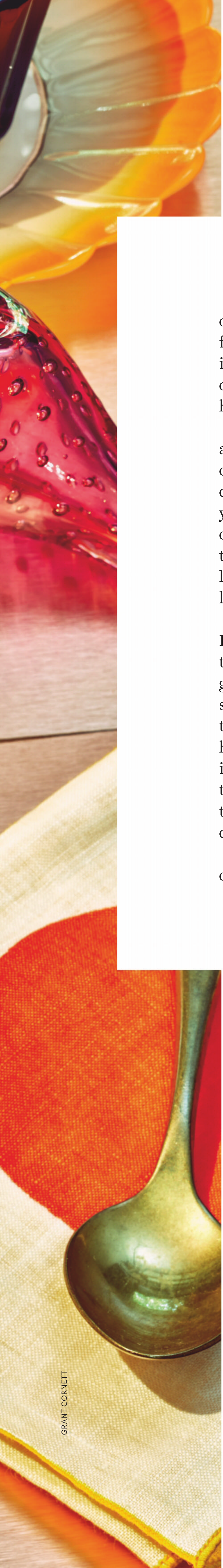
* * *

Drummer’s visibility as a black female chef matters. Since starting Elevation VIP she has worked her way to the top, including landing an appearance as a competitor on Netflix’s cannabis cooking show *Cooking on High* in 2018. Her name has appeared on lists of America’s top cannabis chefs, which is how her sous-chef, Rochelle Tyler, discovered her. “I was like, ‘Oh, that’s so cool, a black woman on the list,’ ” says Tyler, also a woman of color, who started working for Drummer after an introduction from a mutual friend. “She’s always speaking up for people like us.”

More than 80 percent of legal cannabis companies are under white ownership, while only about four percent are owned by black people. At the same time, cannabis arrests are rising in the U.S. On average, blacks are almost four times more likely to be arrested for cannabis than their white counterparts, despite roughly equal use. There is, however, a chance for cannabis legalization to be informed by social justice, if the people in power keep these disparities in mind. The House Judiciary Subcommittee

KANYA IWANA

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **GRANT CORNETT**



GRANT CORNETT

“IT’S A LOT OF PRESSURE, BUT WHAT’S THE ALTERNATIVE?”

on Crime, Terrorism, and Homeland Security held its first hearing in July 2019 to discuss social equity in the industry—an early step toward mending prohibition’s damage and aiding communities disproportionately harmed by the drug war.

“If you’re in this industry and blind to the fact that a great number of black and brown people are incarcerated for doing the very thing we have the freedom to earn a living from, I would say shame on you,” Drummer says. The chef describes her vision of diversity-minded hiring practices: “I want to change the landscape of who we see in the industry. I would love for anyone who has been exonerated of a nonviolent cannabis crime to come and work in the kitchen.”

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It has been two hours since I arrived, and I’m starting to feel a little claustrophobic. But Drummer is still engrossed in food prep, now tinkering with the ice cream sandwiches. I pack up my things and make my way to the door, stopping to wish her luck. She grasps my hand and looks me in the eye. “I’m so scared,” she says in a low voice. “It’s a lot of pressure, but what’s the alternative? Sitting around and not being able to change the narrative? Not being able to hire people to be a part of this industry? Not having learned anything?”

She shakes her head. “So I’ll take it,” she says. “I’ll do the work so someone else doesn’t have to.” ■

bliss your heart

With psilocybin once again in the running to become a legitimate treatment for anxiety, we sent a writer deep into the Mexican jungle to face her fears. Did she find inner peace?

BY **MICHELLE JANIKIAN**

ILLUSTRATIONS BY **MAX LOEFFLER**

I arrive in a van with six other Americans after traveling on a long, stomach-turning dirt road to the heart of the jungle outside Playa del Carmen, Mexico. The resort is a maze of wooden boardwalks, but the foliage still creeps through and grazes my limbs. We are led, one by one, down overgrown paths that open into large event spaces, including the appropriately dubbed Buddha Hall, where three days of transformative psilocybin ceremonies will take place.

We're a total of 20 participants. We eat dinner together in a decadent, palace-like setting and play Two Truths and a Lie to break the ice before heading to bed. It's still early. I lie in my room—a private, nearly square enclosure with wall-length windows overlooking dense greenery—while I patiently wait for daylight.

The next morning is a blur. There's dosing information, contracts to sign and the group activity of "intentions setting"—a discussion during which almost everyone cries, myself included. I reveal my experiences with drug abuse and depression, the story of a friend's death and my recovery afterward. It comes out easily because everyone around me is emotional; they have their own reasons for being here.

First-person research for my upcoming book, *Your Psilocybin Mushroom Companion,* is what has led me to the Buena Vida Psilocybin Retreat in the Yucatán Peninsula's tropical wonderland. The tag line of this roving retreat is "Embark on a journey of a lifetime with the help of magical fungi."

For the 19 others, their journeys to this moment may not have started with a simple Google search as mine did, but I suspect they're here because of the hard-to-ignore attention psilocybin has received of late—in particular, the reports that this psychoactive compound, found in more than 100 species of mushroom of the genus *Psilocybe,* may assist in treating several mental health issues and disorders. Having paid $3,000 for the week-long experience, they're here to begin healing from personal traumas I can't begin to understand.

Although psychedelic drugs are most closely associated with the hippie culture of the 1960s, interest in them has remained consistent over the years. In 2016, the *Journal of Psychopharmacology* published two studies that determined that doses of psilocybin, which alters perception, eased cancer patients' distress. In 2017, the Global Drug Survey named mushrooms the safest drug on the planet. New York University and Johns Hopkins University recently conducted clinical trials, the results of which lend credence to the argument that psilocybin could work as a therapy for otherwise treatment-resistant depression, addiction and anxiety. While the Drug Enforcement Administration still lists the mushroom compound as a Schedule I substance, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration has designated it a "breakthrough therapy," opening the door for expedited clinical trials to be conducted by Compass Pathways, a mental health research firm. Why wouldn't we, with the proper guidance from this retreat's shamans, see positive results?

The Buena Vida retreat—founded in 2015 by Amanda Schendel, a "psychedelic expert" whose previous careers include positions in sales and comedy—maintains that its goal is "to provide safe access to healing plant medicines within the context of ritual and ceremony." Thus, before the first of the three mushroom ceremonies commences, we're encouraged to light a candle on an altar—a small stage adorned with objects of significance and offerings to the spirits and elements of the earth—and write down our intentions. I scribble a laundry list of emotional goals I would like to achieve over the next six hours, which is my first mistake, and wait for my name to be called. When it is, I'm given a fragrant spray of *agua de florida* to purify my spirit. The shaman proceeds to sit me down. I get chills as my doubt about her power fades with the smoke from the sacred tobacco she's wafting. I'm given a clay mug of mushroom tea. The serving is one and a half grams.

The aroma of palo santo ("holy wood") burning with sage engulfs me. My tea is steeping and my mind races as I ready myself on my yoga mat. The 20 of us drink our tea in unison. Most of the group then lie down and close their eyes, surrendering to the medicine. I remain sitting up, partly to watch people's reactions and partly because I find myself enchanted by the shaman's echoing voice.

Even though I know the lighting is dim, it suddenly feels unbearably bright. My limbs start to become limp, exhausted. I chuckle at the feeling, lie back and close my eyes. But instead of

finding peace or feeling blissed out, my mind is chaotic and my thoughts are negative. *Why do people do this, again?* I feel nauseated as the drug rumbles through my insides. The shaman's voice turns haunting, vibrating through the pavilion. I'm struggling to let go, hesitant to allow the mushrooms to do their work.

The anxiety I've felt leading up to this trip—anxiety specifically tied to writing my book—grows vicious. I worry that I'm not qualified to write a mushroom guide. I'm worthless. I'm stupid. I try sitting up and opening my eyes, but the thoughts continue, and I start to cry. There are no trippy visuals to distract me. I want to get out, to be alone, but I signed a waiver promising I would stay in the ceremony space. A facilitator brings me tissues and sits with me.

I try again to go back inward. I lie down and close my eyes, but the overriding voice in my head screams at me to kill myself. I have to sit up. I can't handle it.

These drugs are dangerous, I think, and I feel the weight of everyone who may read my book and take my advice. It's too much pressure. I keep bawling. A mountain of soggy tissues grows beside me. I'm a fraud.

It's another four hours before my negative thoughts dry up. Facilitators bring around a tray of fruit, signaling the end of the ceremony. I leave as a shell of myself, brewing a crying-induced headache. I wonder if other people went through the same thing, but everyone else seems effervescent at dinner time. We eat in a space that resembles a spooky, overgrown Chinese restaurant. Some of my favorite foods are on the table—falafel, pita, hummus—but eating seems foreign. I listen to others talk about their relaxing experiences, their crazy visions. Am I broken?

The next morning I'm raw, and Advil can't touch my headache. I sleep through yoga and rush to get changed so I don't miss breakfast. Surviving today will require coffee. Immediately after breakfast, we have an "integration meeting" on the rooftop terrace, which glitters with Indian teahouse–style decorations. I strain to get comfortable as I absorb everyone's journeys. Most describe good trips. When it's my turn, I start crying again. I suggest I need to talk to a facilitator one-on-one. People are understanding. The group moves on.

I continue to feel exposed; tears flood at the simplest thoughts. When I try talking to others I feel a bit better, less alone. In the afternoon I swim with some people in a cenote (a limestone swimming hole) at the center of the grounds, though I still feel distant. After dinner I join everyone for what they're calling an "ecstatic dance party." We spread glow sticks on the floor, and I start to move around, pushing out my heavy energy with the music's beat. Tears again rush down my face.

I feel lighter by the day of the second ceremony. I make it to yoga class but bail halfway through meditation to take a walk in the woods with a woman around my age from the Midwest and a man at the other end of his 30s from Denver. It feels good to connect with them. I am at ease.

Our second mushroom ceremony kicks off while the sun is still out, around three P.M. I ditch the pre-ceremony acupuncture and sound bath to form my own ritual: swimming in the cenote with some new friends, a social worker in his 50s and a scientist in his 30s. I take a shower and call my partner before skipping off to the ceremony with the scientist. We set up our yoga mats near a Wall Street guy with whom I've bonded over our shared New Jersey roots. I'm feeling more comfortable and less anxious this time. I go to the altar before the ceremony and jot down my intention—simply "I love you." Then I wait, much more calmly than yesterday, to collect my mushroom tea. This round, I drink two and a half grams.

A nature walk is offered during this ceremony, and an hour or so into the experience I feel ready to explore. My wanderlust is partially brought on by the scientist, who seems to be having a negative reaction. The shaman sings over him and facilitators hold him down as he thrashes in distress. I'm worried, but I'm also sure he'll be okay.

With a small group and a facilitator, I stroll down rickety wooden planks through the jungle. We hold on to one another as we stop to examine trees and discuss their personalities like kids playing make-believe. The sun beams through the foliage the way it does just before dusk, hues of gold sparkling off the tropical leaves. At some point we run into another group of nature walkers, and together we venture to admire the cenote. We're told swimming is forbidden. We lament, because it's hot and humid.

The banker from New Jersey finds me.

"It's so good to see you!" he says enthusiastically.

He reports that he just came back from losing his ego and relates how terrifying it was.

"I feel like I'll never be depressed again," he exclaims. "It all feels so irrelevant now."

We head up a path of mosaic chakras to a wild and bright pavilion. Every inch is covered in hand-painted images of Buddhism. Lying on the cool stone ground, we watch with compassion, randomly chuckling, as ants skitter. The laughter echoes around me, fills my belly and makes me feel connected to these strangers in a way I've always struggled with. We're not that different, a voice inside me says. I don't have to be an outsider.

We return to the ceremony space to find the scientist coming out of hell. He's still scared, and I struggle to comfort him.

"If that's what it's like to die, I'm even more afraid," he tells me. I look at him deeply but don't know what to say. He's contradicting everything I've learned about the death of one's ego. Wasn't it supposed to be mystical?

We're politely asked to be quiet. We go back to our separate spots and lie down for the remainder of the ceremony. I feel great waves of self-acceptance and love—emotions I couldn't even fathom during the first ceremony. As the session ends, I'm more content and confident. At dinner, I consume more guava than is healthy to eat.

I wake up the next morning feeling elated, enlightened even. We're scheduled to take a break from tripping and go on an excursion outside the dense jungle. We're chauffeured to cenotes and beach clubs. I somehow feel comfortable and connected to everything around me.

The following day, I feel invincible ahead of our final ceremony. Opening up during the group session for the first time without tears, I talk to fellow participants without self-doubt. My mind clears all anxiety to make room for the present. I do yoga and meditate. The ceremony begins in the afternoon, and the familiar space is set up for us to sit in a circle, facing one another. I settle between two women I find admirable and ask to take four grams (the maximum offer is five). The facilitators have us stand and pass along the *agua de florida,* followed by a massive collective embrace. I usually dread the thought of touch, but the warmth is sweet. I set my intentions.

Teach me, I'm listening.

I'm determined to go inward—to resist resistance—so I secure my headphones queued with spiritual sounds and put my sunglasses on after finishing the tea. I focus on breathing with the hope of being taken on a vision quest, but all I see is the black inside of my eyelids. Just before longing and disappointment set in, the mushrooms transport me to a place where hardship and anxiety feel silly. I don't see Technicolor swirls or splashes of neon, just a pure white light. I transcend my identity as a neurotic writer (with crippling impostor syndrome) and laugh out loud at my foolish problems. The white light has always been here.

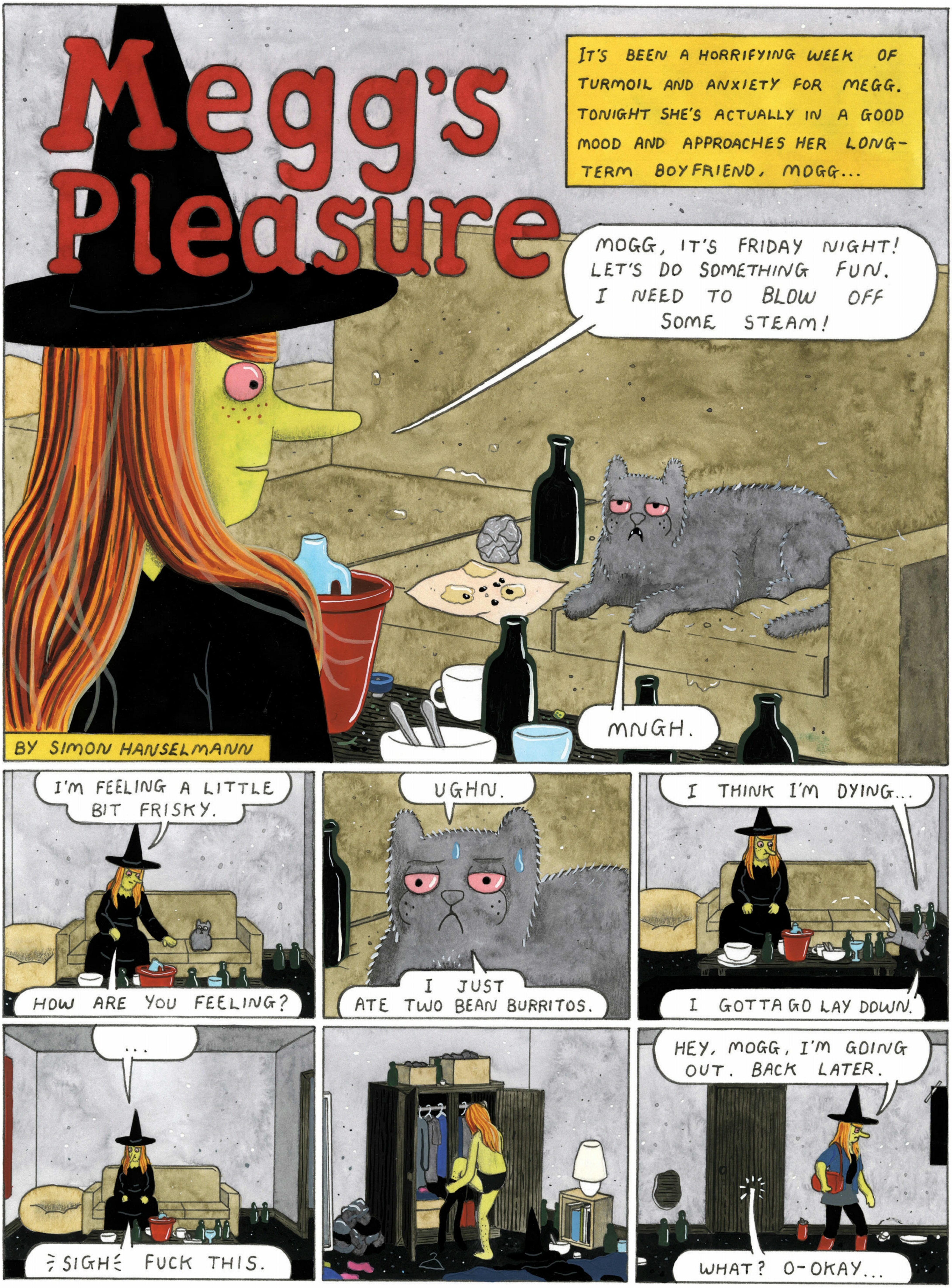
I usually dread the thought of touch, but the warmth is sweet.

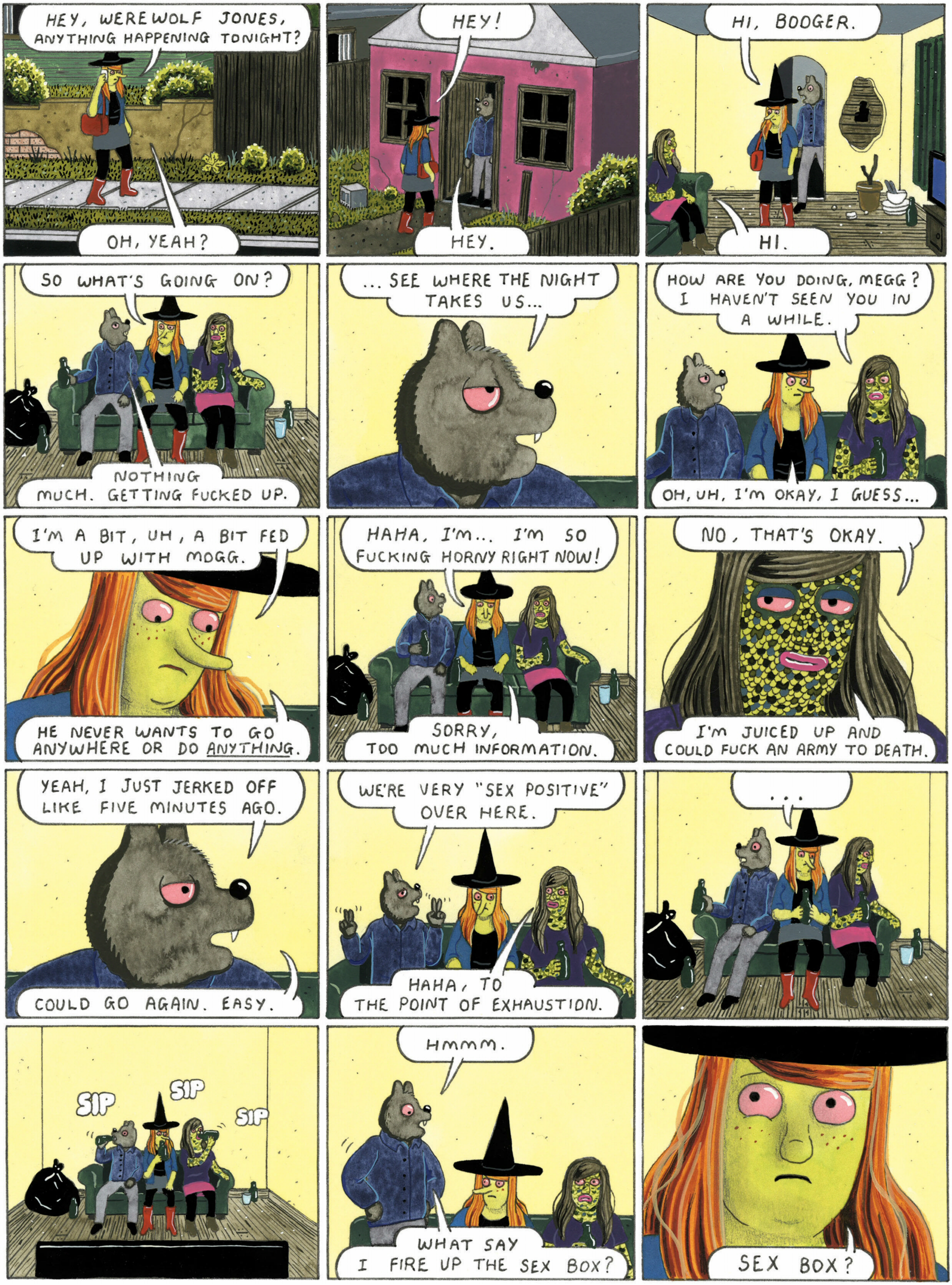
When my mind wanders to my book, it's no longer burdened by stress. *Anything I don't know, I can learn. The only thing holding me back is me!* My book takes the shape of an epic tree that's so tall the top isn't visible to me. I'm in awe of it, as I would be of a giant ancient redwood. I see my life clearly—that I've created something beautiful. Its beauty should be cherished.

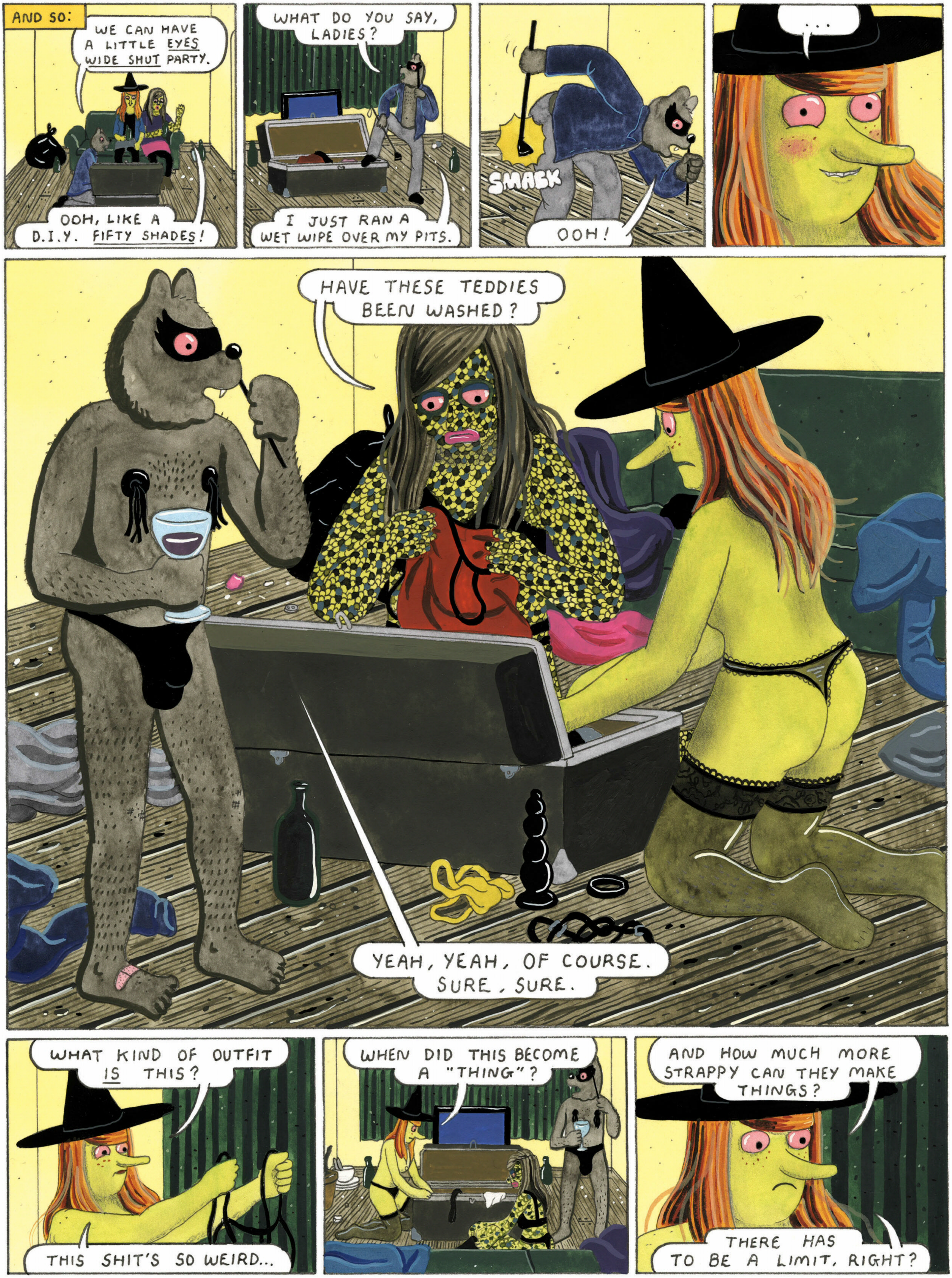
I open my eyes and survey my surroundings. I smile, recognizing all the people here with me doing their human thing, trying to comfort one another and themselves. I understand life's beauty, even if it also seems futile while I explore another plane of reality. Some people begin to huddle. I want to be close to them, but I'm not quite ready. First, I'm granted permission to sit alone with some trees behind the altar. I'm connected to the jungle. I thank the jungle out loud, cross-legged and staring into the darkness.

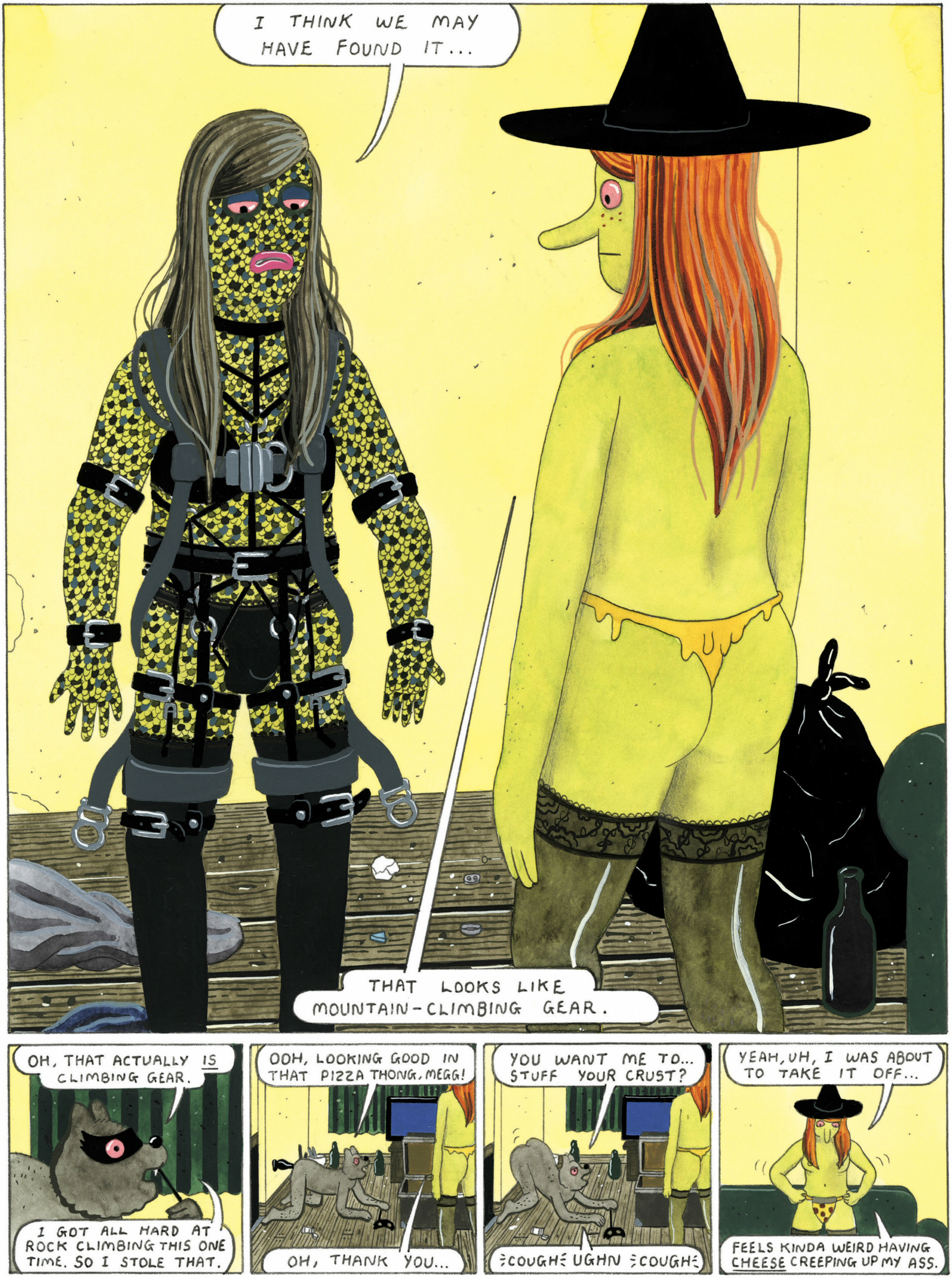
When I emerge from the trees, the others welcome me back. I snuggle under a blanket with the scientist and a model from New York; it's the closest I've felt to friends since I was in college almost a decade ago. We giggle and sigh. We invite others to join. I feel the light even after the visual fades.

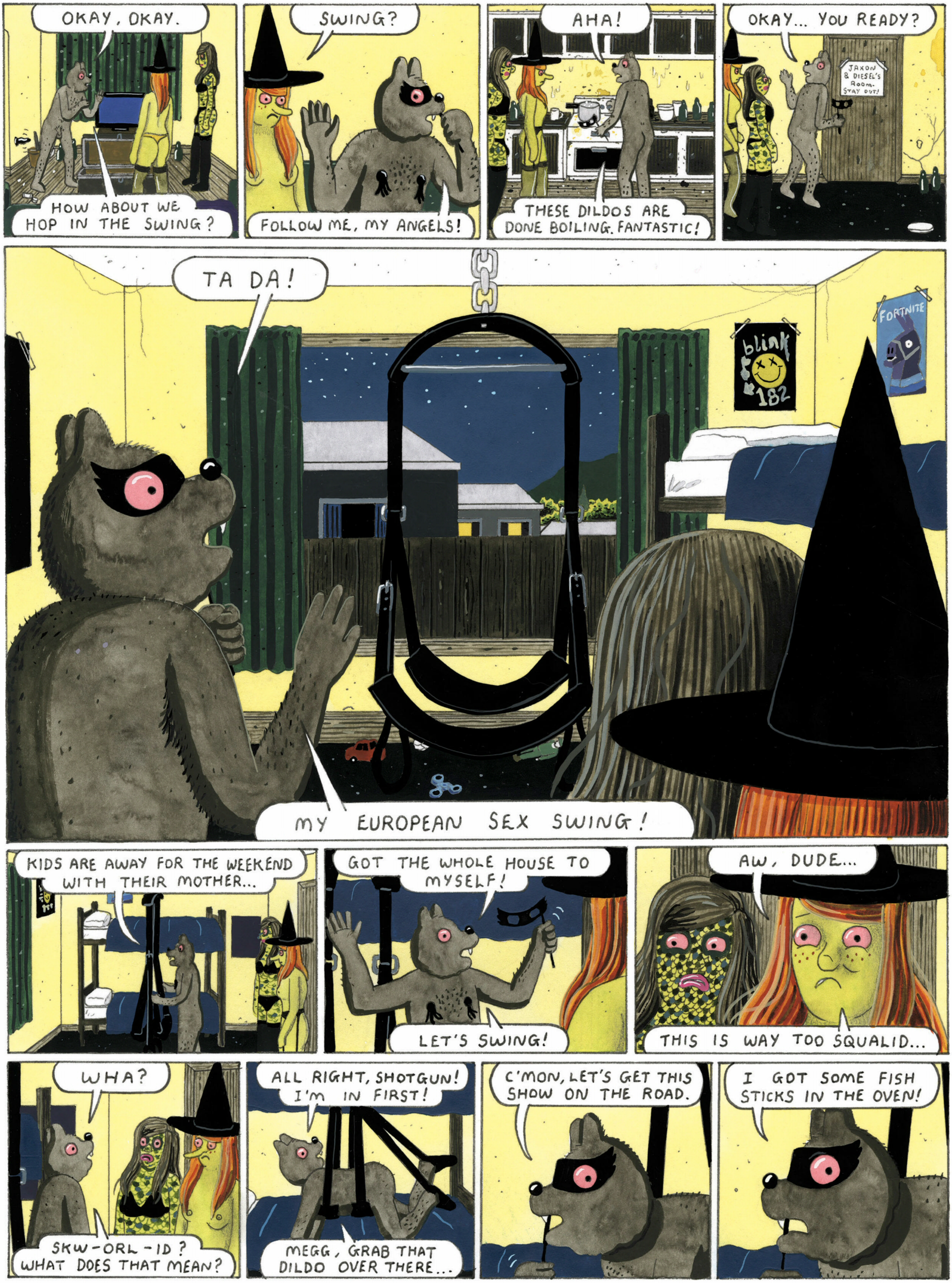
This is why people do this. ■

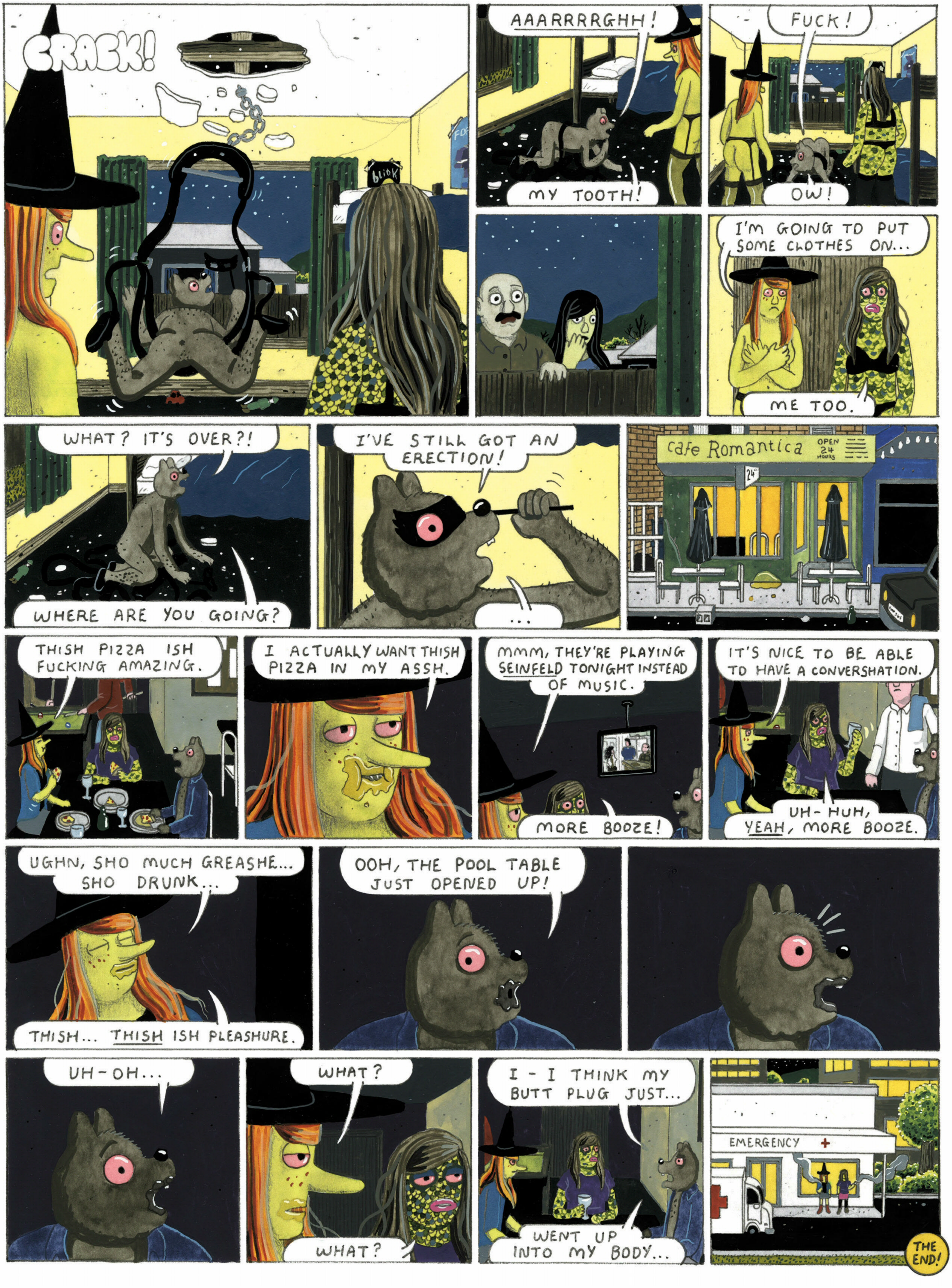

Megg's Pleasure
IT'S BEEN A HORRIFYING WEEK OF TURMOIL AND ANXIETY FOR MEGG. TONIGHT SHE'S ACTUALLY IN A GOOD MOOD AND APPROACHES HER LONG-TERM BOYFRIEND, MOGG...
MOGG, IT'S FRIDAY NIGHT! LET'S DO SOMETHING FUN. I NEED TO BLOW OFF SOME STEAM!
MNGH.
BY SIMON HANSELMANN
I'M FEELING A LITTLE BIT FRISKY.
HOW ARE YOU FEELING?
UGHN.
I JUST ATE TWO BEAN BURRITOS.
I THINK I'M DYING...
I GOTTA GO LAY DOWN.
...
SIGH FUCK THIS.
HEY, MOGG, I'M GOING OUT. BACK LATER.
WHAT? O-OKAY...


HEY, WEREWOLF JONES, ANYTHING HAPPENING TONIGHT?
OH, YEAH?
HEY!
HEY.
HI, BOOGER.
HI.
SO WHAT'S GOING ON?
NOTHING MUCH. GETTING FUCKED UP.
... SEE WHERE THE NIGHT TAKES US...
HOW ARE YOU DOING, MEGG? I HAVEN'T SEEN YOU IN A WHILE.
OH, UH, I'M OKAY, I GUESS...
I'M A BIT, UH, A BIT FED UP WITH MOGG.
HE NEVER WANTS TO GO ANYWHERE OR DO ANYTHING.
HAHA, I'M... I'M SO FUCKING HORNY RIGHT NOW!
SORRY, TOO MUCH INFORMATION.
NO, THAT'S OKAY.
I'M JUICED UP AND COULD FUCK AN ARMY TO DEATH.
YEAH, I JUST JERKED OFF LIKE FIVE MINUTES AGO.
COULD GO AGAIN. EASY.
WE'RE VERY "SEX POSITIVE" OVER HERE.
HAHA, TO THE POINT OF EXHAUSTION.
. . .
SIP
SIP
SIP
HMMM.
WHAT SAY I FIRE UP THE SEX BOX?
SEX BOX?


AND SO:
WE CAN HAVE A LITTLE EYES WIDE SHUT PARTY.
OOH, LIKE A D.I.Y. FIFTY SHADES!
WHAT DO YOU SAY, LADIES?
I JUST RAN A WET WIPE OVER MY PITS.
SMACK
OOH!
...
HAVE THESE TEDDIES BEEN WASHED?
YEAH, YEAH, OF COURSE. SURE, SURE.
WHAT KIND OF OUTFIT IS THIS?
THIS SHIT'S SO WEIRD...
WHEN DID THIS BECOME A "THING"?
AND HOW MUCH MORE STRAPPY CAN THEY MAKE THINGS?
THERE HAS TO BE A LIMIT, RIGHT?


I THINK WE MAY HAVE FOUND IT...
THAT LOOKS LIKE MOUNTAIN-CLIMBING GEAR.
OH, THAT ACTUALLY IS CLIMBING GEAR.
I GOT ALL HARD AT ROCK CLIMBING THIS ONE TIME. SO I STOLE THAT.
OOH, LOOKING GOOD IN THAT PIZZA THONG, MEGG!
OH, THANK YOU...
YOU WANT ME TO... STUFF YOUR CRUST?
≈COUGH≈ UGHN ≈COUGH≈
YEAH, UH, I WAS ABOUT TO TAKE IT OFF...
FEELS KINDA WEIRD HAVING CHEESE CREEPING UP MY ASS.


OKAY, OKAY.
HOW ABOUT WE HOP IN THE SWING?
SWING?
FOLLOW ME, MY ANGELS!
AHA!
THESE DILDOS ARE DONE BOILING. FANTASTIC!
OKAY... YOU READY?
JAXON & DIESEL'S Room. STAY OUT!
TA DA!
blink 182
FORTNITE
MY EUROPEAN SEX SWING!
KIDS ARE AWAY FOR THE WEEKEND WITH THEIR MOTHER...
GOT THE WHOLE HOUSE TO MYSELF!
LET'S SWING!
AW, DUDE...
THIS IS WAY TOO SQUALID...
WHA?
SKW-ORL-ID? WHAT DOES THAT MEAN?
ALL RIGHT, SHOTGUN! I'M IN FIRST!
MEGG, GRAB THAT DILDO OVER THERE...
C'MON, LET'S GET THIS SHOW ON THE ROAD.
I GOT SOME FISH STICKS IN THE OVEN!


CRACK!
blink
AAARRRRGHH!
MY TOOTH!
FUCK!
OW!
I'M GOING TO PUT SOME CLOTHES ON...
ME TOO.
WHAT? IT'S OVER?!
WHERE ARE YOU GOING?
I'VE STILL GOT AN ERECTION!
...
cafe Romantica
OPEN 24 HOURS
24
THISH PIZZA ISH FUCKING AMAZING.
I ACTUALLY WANT THISH PIZZA IN MY ASSH.
MMM, THEY'RE PLAYING SEINFELD TONIGHT INSTEAD OF MUSIC.
MORE BOOZE!
IT'S NICE TO BE ABLE TO HAVE A CONVERSHATION.
UH-HUH, YEAH, MORE BOOZE.
UGHN, SHO MUCH GREASHE... SHO DRUNK...
THISH... THISH ISH PLEASHURE.
OOH, THE POOL TABLE JUST OPENED UP!
UH-OH...
WHAT?
WHAT?
I - I THINK MY BUTT PLUG JUST...
WENT UP INTO MY BODY...
EMERGENCY
THE END!

THE
REPAIRMAN

According to **Anand Giridharadas,** money can't fix a broken democracy when the checks are cut by the elite. Inside the journalist's unexpected calling to fix a crumbling system, one speaking gig at a time

BY **MATTHEW SHAER**

The e-mail that led to the speaking gig that led to the book deal that led to the mid-career-ish reinvention arrived in Anand Giridharadas's in-box about four years ago, at the tail end of May. The Aspen Institute, a fantastically influential (and equally deep-pocketed) think tank, was planning its annual Action Forum—a place, as the institute's website boasted, for "action-oriented leaders to come together, pause, reflect, refresh and recommit to doing their part to build a better world." Several hundred people were expected to attend. Was Giridharadas interested in delivering the keynote address?

A former South Asia correspondent for *The New York Times* and the *International Herald Tribune,* Giridharadas had been involved with Aspen since 2011, when he was recruited as a fellow in the organization's Global Leadership Network. Many summers he flew to the foothills of the Elk Mountains to take part in days of symposia and conversations about the biggest of "big ideas." Poverty. Inequality. Migration. War. Peace. He collected rich and powerful friends and flew with them on private jets and dined with them at cliff-top mansions.

Initially, the whole experience was invigorating. But over time, a sense of skepticism set in. Unlike many of the other fellows, Giridharadas was not a professional philanthropist. He was certainly not an entrepreneur. ("Writing, if it is a business, isn't a very good one," he has said.) He was a journalist. His job was to question and poke holes in things. Although he admired the charity efforts of many Aspen attendees and donors—at both the corporate and individual levels—he was unnerved by what he increasingly viewed as high-level image laundering.

"It dawned on me that at Aspen we were sitting in the Koch Brothers Building, talking about making democracy better," he tells me. "We're talking about health, and we were doing it at events sponsored by Monsanto or Pepsi. Basically, the people who belonged to the institutions responsible for breaking the modern world were gathering each summer to talk about fixing the modern world."

The organizers of the Action Forum proposed that Giridharadas deliver an address based on his 2015 TED Talk, which was based on his second book, *The True American,* about a hate crime in Texas and the (failed) efforts of one of the surviving victims to prevent a convicted killer from being executed. Giridharadas replied: He'd be happy to give a speech. It just might not be the speech Aspen was expecting.

As Giridharadas saw it, he was presented with a golden opportunity: the chance to voice his frustration—and engage in some blunt truth-telling—in front of the very people who, in his mind, needed to hear it most.

"I remember the pope had just delivered encyclicals on climate change and on capitalism," he tells me, "and that gave me some extra courage, you know? I figured, That guy is risking assassination for saying the most unsayable things in our civilization as a leader of the most hierarchical big organization on earth. Surely I can give my trinket of a speech in Aspen."

In late July 2015, he took the stage at Aspen's Paepcke Auditorium. He wore a black dress shirt, the collar unfastened. His hair was combed into his usual impressive silver crest. "I was asked to speak to you today about forgiveness," he began. In at least one important sense, he joked, he would stay true to that topic. "After I have spoken, I will need your forgiveness."

He then launched into one of the most spectacular, outrageous addresses ever given at an Aspen gathering—a 30-minute diatribe that *New York Times* columnist David Brooks, an attendee, later described as "courageous and provocative."

"We plainly live in a new Gilded Age, in which extraordinary changes in our economies and technologies have created, as revolutionary times always do, extreme winners and extreme losers," Giridharadas said. The winners are doing great. But the losers "are watching their lives get worse day by day—sometimes, perhaps, so that ours can get better."

Yes, Aspen existed to address these inequities, to "build a better

ILLUSTRATION BY **CARMI GRAU**

world," as the language on the website professed. But only on specific terms. "I call it the Aspen Consensus," Giridharadas explained. "The Aspen Consensus, in a nutshell, is this: The winners of our age must be challenged to do more good. But never, ever tell them to do less harm. The Aspen Consensus holds that capitalism's rough edges must be sanded and its surplus fruit shared, but the underlying system must never be questioned."

He gave an example: a multimillion-dollar cash donation that allows "100 poor kids in the ghetto to learn how to code." On the one hand, what a noble gesture! On the other, was the donation really dissimilar from the papal indulgences once purchased by wealthy elites in medieval times?

"The indulgence," Giridharadas argued, "spares you from questions about the larger systems and structures you sustain that benefit you and punish others: weak banking regulations and labor laws; zoning rules that happen to keep the poor far from your neighborhood; porous safety nets; the enduring and unrepaired legacies of slavery and racial supremacy and caste systems."

Near the end of the address, over rustles in the crowd, Giridharadas laid out a thesis statement. "Let's just come out and say the thing you're never supposed to say in Aspen: that many of the winners of our age are also contributors to the problems they bravely seek to solve. And for the greater good to prevail on any number of issues, some people will have to lose." It did not escape the audience that the losers in that scenario were themselves. Or their closest friends. Or their family members. Or their colleagues and peers.

"That moment, in retrospect, was amazing," Giridharadas tells me, "because there was a standing ovation, there were loud cheers, but when you looked a little closer at some of the people in the crowd—their eyes! Man, their *eyes.* They looked like they wanted to kill me."

Like the pope, Giridharadas had said the unsayable, and he had said it loudly. As he exited the stage, a stranger grabbed his elbow and whispered two fierce words into his ear.

"*¡Que cojones!*" the woman said, grinning.

• • •

The most effective way to critique a system is to understand it, and oftentimes the best way to understand something is to have grown up within it, to speak its language fluently. Giridharadas is very much a product of privilege. He spent his teenage years in Chevy Chase, Maryland, one of the toniest suburbs of Washington, D.C. He went to Sidwell Friends School, the same Quaker academy attended by Chelsea Clinton and Sasha and Malia Obama. Many of his classmates came from families of those who "barnacle around official Washington: the PR people, the lobbyists, the lawyers," he says.

Still, Giridharadas, whose mother was an art teacher and whose father was a consultant at McKinsey and an executive at Capital One, was a limit-pusher—a "flamethrower" from the start. "I was a difficult kid," he admits. "My mom always jokes that she's relieved I'm now taking it out on the richest and most powerful people on earth, rather than her."

In his senior year at Sidwell, Giridharadas and a close friend, Tory Newmyer (now an economics reporter with *The Washington Post*), edited the school paper with "the idea that we were Woodward and Bernstein." When they put together a feature on a cheating scandal at the school, the Sidwell administration prevented the issue from being printed.

"We pulled the story because we had to, but we printed a front page that read 'For an explanation of why this front page is blank, turn to the editorial on page two,' " he recalls. "And then we wrote this editorial about censorship and free speech. Depending on your perspective, it was either extremely moving or extremely self-important and vomitous. Albert Camus was definitely quoted."

Sidwell has a strong track record of getting its students into the Ivies, but Giridharadas had middling grades. Harvard and Columbia turned him down, as did six other top schools. His lone acceptance letter came from the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, where he decided to major in history with an emphasis on politics. Throughout college, he attempted to break into journalism. As a teenager he'd had an internship at *The New York Times,* and during his later college years he approached then Washington, D.C. bureau chief Jill Abramson, one of his mentors, for advice.

Abramson, in his recollection, suggested he "get out into the world" to give himself an education in a particular culture or discipline and use the experience to inform his reporting. It was fantastically good advice, Giridharadas tells me. "Real writing," he says, "comes with some kind of collision with the

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **CHRIS SCHOONOVER**

“HE’S OUTSPOKEN IN A WAY THAT CAN HELP.”

unfamiliar. And being a kind of careerist kid in Washington wasn’t going to supply that magic.”

He worked as a consultant for McKinsey in India, the country of his parents’ birth, for a year, making about $14,000. (“I applied for an Indian position and got an Indian salary,” he says.) Then a reporting job opened up in the India bureau of the *International Herald Tribune,* a paper owned by the New York Times Company. Against his expectations, he got it. Soon, he was crisscrossing India as a foreign correspondent, covering the booming economy and the ways it was transforming a society thousands of years old. That reporting became the basis of his first book, *India Calling: An Intimate Portrait of a Nation’s Remaking,* published in 2011. A few years later, back in the U.S. and working from Brooklyn as a columnist for *The New York Times,* he published *The True American*. Both were admired by critics, if not exactly universally read.

Between finishing *India Calling* and starting *The True American,* Giridharadas had briefly attended a political science doctoral program at Harvard. With his background, he knew he could find a decent job in public policy, perhaps at a think tank or in the government. He might also have simply continued writing articles and books. Then he gave his March 2015 TED Talk tied to *The True American,* which became a turning point.

Viewed nearly 1.5 million times, the speech, which Giridharadas delivered after working with a professional acting coach supplied by TED, reached far more people than his writing usually did. It showed him what might be possible if he moved away from being a writer sequestered at a desk to the forefront of conversation and debate.

“I would have loved to live in an era in which the writing spoke for itself and you could just do the book and drop it and go back to your cave,” he tells me. “But we don’t live in that age. A book’s a powerful tool, right? It’s also a very limited one.”

If the reception to the TED Talk had surprised him, it was nothing compared with the reaction to his keynote address at the Action Forum four months later.

“I’ve been lucky to have a few moments in my career, three or four maybe, where I feel like I’ve written something that everybody has read,” he says. “This was one of those times.”

Two days after the Aspen address, David Brooks devoted a column to its contents. “Anand’s speech struck me as deeply patriotic in its passion and concern,” he wrote. Soon, Giridharadas had uploaded the text to Medium, where it went viral. By that time, his previous agent had gone back to publishing and he had signed with Lynn Nesbit, a legendary force in the book business who represents such superstars as Robert Caro and Joan Didion.

“I remember Lynn said, ‘This is your next book.’ I was like, ‘Maybe. I don’t know.’ And she was like, ‘Trust me. I’ve been around a long time, and the world is telling you something. This is a resonant topic. This is your next book,’ ” he says.

Nesbit was right. Released by Knopf last year, *Winners Take All: The Elite Charade of Changing the World* climbed bestseller lists, selling more copies than Giridharadas’s two previous books combined. Essentially a reported version of his Aspen speech, *Winners Take All* uses encapsulated profiles to bolster its case. Bill Clinton is needled for trading an insistence that government is best equipped to level the societal playing field for an embrace of privately funded NGOs (shepherded by “world-traveling elites”). Meanwhile, Darren Walker, president of the Ford Foundation, is praised for his “taboo”-busting insistence on talking—publicly and in detail—about how the wealth of the current generation of philanthropists was made, whether through drugs (the Sacklers) or diabetes-inducing junk food.

“Are we ready to hand over our future to the elite, one supposedly world-changing initiative at a time? Are we ready to call participatory democracy a failure and to declare these other, private forms of change-making the new way forward?”

Giridharadas asks. “Or is meaningful democracy, in which we all potentially have a voice, worth fighting for?”

• • •

In the year and change since the release of *Winners Take All,* Giridharadas has been on the road nearly constantly, speaking at book fairs and political conferences but also in venues where one would expect him to be very much unwelcome. Think Google or Harvard Business School, that bastion of big capitalism and the launching point for many a well-compensated career in consultancy. Videos of some of these engagements have become social media sensations. At Google, for example, Giridharadas suggested to his audience that it may be better for society if the internet giant were dismantled.

This spring, over lunch in Atlanta, where Giridharadas was slated to give a talk to a local philanthropic group, I wondered—given his track record—why companies like Google keep paying him to speak to their employees.

“I’ll give you two theories,” he says, laughing. “First theory is that everyone thinks *Winners Take All* is about everyone else but them.” In other words, a bigwig at Google was comfortable having him around because said bigwig believed Giridharadas was indicting someone else altogether, someone far more explicitly wicked. “I would bet a lot of white people reading Ta-Nehisi Coates’s book felt it was about all white people except themselves,” Giridharadas says.

Second theory: A certain subset of powerful individuals has the self-awareness to withstand a challenge. They enjoy the debate. “They see the book as a tool to look at themselves,” Giridharadas theorizes, “which is not to say they agree with me on everything. Trust me, they don’t. They typically disagree on points like the government being any kind of solution to the kinds of problems I raised. But, to the credit of many of the people I’m indicting, a bunch of people chose to plead to the indictment and show up in court and have the proceedings.”

Winners Take All “has caused great waves in big philanthropy—this notion that some of us need to take a good look in the mirror,” the venture capitalist Freada Kapor Klein tells me.

“Achieving real change is something Mitch [her husband] and I have been trying to do for a while, and we had such a sense of vindication reading Anand’s book,” adds Kapor Klein, who founded the nonprofit STEM education initiative SMASH. “He’s being truthful, being outspoken in a way that can really help.”

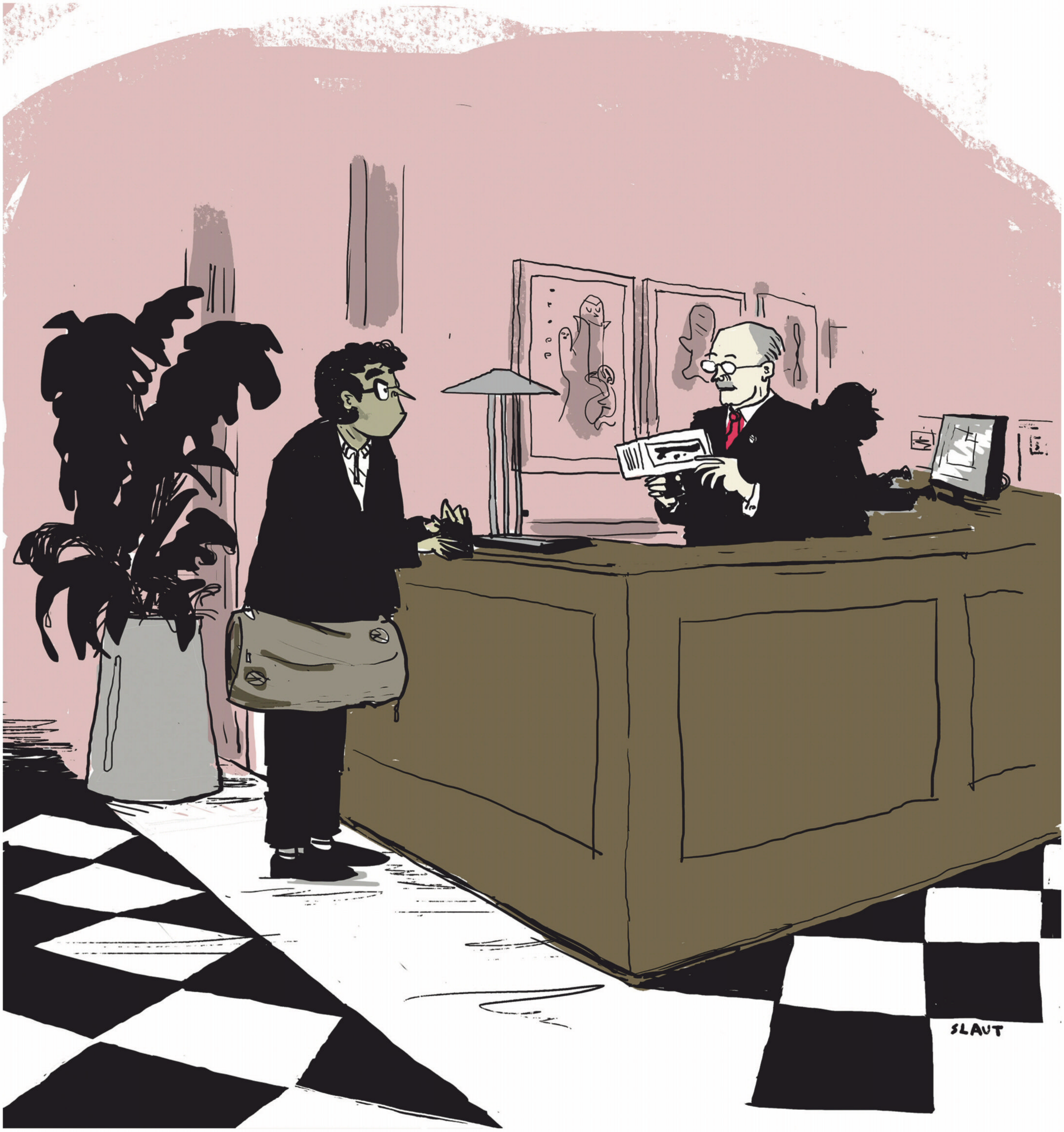
When I reach out to Craig Newmark, founder of Craigslist and head of Craig Newmark Philanthropies, he says something similar. *Winners Take All,* Newmark tells me over e-mail, “reminds me of my values, like ‘take less and give more,’ and that a person should measure their wealth by how much they give away.”

In recent weeks, Giridharadas, a newly minted editor at large at *Time* magazine and commentator for MSNBC and NBC News, has trained much of his attention on the upcoming presidential campaign, penning a lengthy profile of Bernie Sanders and decrying the chaotic, calamitous nature of the Trump presidency on *Morning Joe.* To Giridharadas, this kind of work is not a departure from what he set out to do in *Winners Take All* but a logical extension. The book, he tells me, “provides a good filter for viewing” the candidates seeking to oust Trump: the ones like Sanders and Elizabeth Warren, who understand that true equality will require the rich to give up more than they’d like, and the politicians like Joe Biden, who believe, as Giridharadas puts it, that “we can pull up the disadvantaged while also helping those at the top prosper even more.”

The election of a figure from the former group, he argues, could result in real change. The alternative is not encouraging. “I think what would happen is a substantial percentage of what is disastrous about this country would indeed go away,” he says. “There won’t be gulags at the border, there won’t be ‘Muslim bans.’ But all the deeper elements of the disease that made Trump possible will remain in place. Super-wealthy people will retain a monopoly on the fruits of the future, and yes, we will keep getting Trump-like figures.”

It’s getting late. Giridharadas has to change out of his T-shirt and jeans and into a suit to deliver his next reality check. By all reasonable standards, he should be exhausted. He flew from an event in England last night, and he’s flying to New York in the morning. But the prospect of today’s event seems to energize him. It brings him to life. He relishes the idea of getting back onstage and laying into the rich and powerful in front of a fresh group of listeners.

“There’s this concept, especially in the business world, that criticism itself has been discredited, that it’s not effective,” he tells me before leaving. “But criticism, I think, can be incredibly productive. It stops us from listening to the wrong people. It helps us see people we thought were prophets as crooks. And once that’s done, a whole lot becomes possible.” ■



"If you're a fan of business, I think you're really going to enjoy pleasure."

better nature

PHOTOGRAPHY BY

KANYA IWANA

NOVEMBER PLAYMATE

November Playmate **Gillian Chan** deftly balances working the camera with working to change the way we think about mental health

Simply put, pleasure means peace of mind. It exists in the moments when I feel supported, loved or in communion with nature. And in recent years I've realized that practicing self-care is key.

I come from a multi-ethnic family: My father is half Chinese and half Canadian, and my mother is Jamaican; both were raised with strong morals and values. An ethic of hard work was ingrained in them, but like most families with similar backgrounds, open discussions about emotions and wellness weren't common. It's not a failure on anyone's part; it's the outcome of generations of individuals who had to work harder than most—thus, mental health was not a priority. Conversations about mental health are incredibly varied across cultures, and I think it's important to educate people about non-Eurocentric views of psychology and to be mindful of the history and traditions people may hold.

That's why my goal is to increase access to mental health services through a series of holistic wellness retreats directed toward people of color. Most "retreats" are expensive and consequently available only to certain privileged demographics. I graduated in May with a degree in psychology, and now I want to create resources that destigmatize therapy and that promote safe spaces to discuss trauma, anxiety and depression.

When I moved back to New York two years ago, attending university full time (living the quintessential student life in a windowless apartment in Bushwick, eating ramen regularly), I stumbled upon an Instagram profile of a girl I thought looked similar to me. I found her agency and submitted a photo. They got back to me within the week. I was shocked. I never thought I'd be a model.

As I booked more and more work, I started

Pleasure means peace of mind. And in recent years I've realized that practicing self-care is key.

to realize how modeling could set a foundation for a multifaceted career just by the nature of surrounding myself with creative people and new environments. Every day brings me something new.

When PLAYBOY reached out, my first thought was "Why me? What about me is going to appeal to PLAYBOY?" I don't have a lot of Instagram followers, and I rarely post pictures of myself on the beach in a bikini. I grew up thinking of PLAYBOY as the reality-TV stereotype, but after speaking to the creative team and digging deeper into the magazine's past, I saw decades of LGBTQIA+ inclusion, civil rights activism and features with openly trans models before trans rights was a hot topic of discussion. I've seen how PLAYBOY has changed over the years, and I want to be part of that change.

For me, posing nude feels like a form of artistic expression. Here are the curves of my body, here's how a body looks, and it's normal. Why is it such a big deal?

DATA SHEET

BIRTHPLACE: San Francisco, California **CURRENT CITY:** New York, New York

ON SEXUAL FREEDOM

I went to private school in New York City and felt very sheltered when it came to sex education. Growing up I knew few openly queer people, and sex overall—especially female pleasure—was a taboo subject. When I found out that there are different kinds of sex, I started to think, "Okay, this is what I like, this is how you do it and this is how to please yourself." Now I feel free and in control of where my body is and how it's treated. Knowing what I like: That's freedom to me.

ON INDULGENCE

I'm a total hedonist. My ideal lazy day involves sitting in my bed, eating takeout and taking a bath.

ON FEELING GOOD

I feel the self-care movement can be misunderstood at times. I agree that little things such as taking a bath or doing a face mask can be helpful for alleviating the stress of the day, but real healing power comes from creating meaningful routines centered around self-care. I hope brands that are capitalizing on the self-care movement will dive deeper into what self-care and mental health mean beyond the surface level.

ON OVEREXPOSURE

I think Instagram has created this anxiety that people should strive toward gaining likes and followers by any means necessary. People should feel free to share all their experiences, but authenticity is key.

ON MODERN MEDICINE

Psychology fails to take into account a lot of cultural factors. There's a discipline called cultural psychology that promotes a more kaleidoscopic view of mental health. The categorization of mental disorders varies from culture to culture, with some cultures viewing them through a more spiritual lens. There is no "one size fits all" when it comes to healing.

ON GOING UNDER

On a recent trip to Spain I rented a boat and found a diving spot surrounded by caves. I won't lie: It was pretty scary. I saw a humongous jellyfish and scrambled back into my boat. It wasn't a long adventure, but it was an adventure nonetheless!

ON BIG REVEALS

I haven't told my parents yet about my PLAYBOY shoot. Needless to say, I think they'll be a bit surprised. I wore underwear for a shoot once, and my mom was horrified! This is a risk I'm taking, but it's something I'm ready for. I couldn't be more excited to be part of an issue that celebrates pleasure.

Maly Siri

NOVEMBER 2019 PLAYMATE

not me

ILLUSTRATIONS BY **TISHK BARZANJI**

IT WAS A DIFFERENT ERA, A NOT-SO-INNOCENT TIME

FICTION BY

T.C. BOYLE

This was a long time ago. I'd never heard the term sexual harassment in my life—nobody had. Men were men and women were women, and women had what I wanted more than anything in the world—if they were willing to give it to me, I paid elaborate attention to them; if they weren't, it was another story. At the time I was just out of college and I'd picked up a long-term subbing job at the local high school because I had nothing better to do. Beyond that, earning a living was right at the top of my list of priorities, what with student loans coming due and a certain unspoken pressure being exerted on me by way of my best friend, Rob, whose couch I'd been occupying for the previous three months. In any case, I'd heard from my mother, who worked in the superintendent's office, that the English teacher I'd been filling in for sporadically had received a harrowing diagnosis from her oncologist and was going to be out for an indefinite period. I didn't want a permanent job. I didn't want to get up at dawn and have to pretend I was alive. But I knotted my tie in front of the streaked mirror in Rob's bathroom each morning and tried to adjust to a new set of expectations.

Once I'd agreed to step in for Mrs. Leitner till whatever terrible thing that was happening to her came to its conclusion, the chair of the English department, a beefy florid old man of 50 or maybe 60 with a hairstyle that was 80 percent scalp, sat me down in his office and told me there was one cardinal rule: *Don't fraternize with the students,* which was code for *Don't fuck the students.* But this was hard to take seriously because at least three people I knew of fucked the students and for their part the students fucked back, and as long as it was kept discreet everybody looked the other way. One woman—girl, she was a girl my age, in her first year of teaching—developed a crush on one of her students, who'd turned 18 that year and even managed to grow a patchy reddish beard as testament to all he was prepared for. Her desk was next to mine in the department office, and when we weren't plowing through scrawled-over compositions or skimming *Masterplots* to keep one step ahead of the game, Suzanne would lean in confidentially, a red-rimmed cigarette stuck between her lips, and fill me in on the details.

I was unattached at the time, my previous girlfriend having decided I wasn't worth the effort, and the odds of getting reattached were hovering around zero, given the fact that I had to spend my nights on a narrow, dog-stinking five-foot-10-inch paisley couch pushed up against the wall in the living room of a one-bedroom apartment I wasn't paying rent on. Suzanne narrated in a low matter-of-fact voice—where she'd gone with him, when, what they did together and the delicious fact that nobody suspected them, least of all his parents, whom she'd met only once, at parent-teacher night—all the while watching my face for signals, which I suppressed. Or thought I did. She wasn't my type, or not entirely, but that didn't stop me from picturing these situations, she spread naked across the bed and the student—Alec, who was tall and rope-shouldered—climbing atop her or taking her up against the wall in the apartment with the private entrance she shared with nobody.

Was all this a secret? If she'd told me, she must have told other people too, and I did mention it to Rob, who just shrugged and said, "Good luck," and when I asked, "What does that mean?" he gave me a long look and said, "You'd have to be a monk to resist all that—and by the way, when was the last time you got laid?"

I took the question for what it was—a rebuke—but resisted throwing it back at him, since he wasn't doing much better, his own girlfriend sealed behind the faded brick walls of a dormitory at the end of a dark street in a dark college town 400 miles away. So when Friday came along—one of a long tottering row of Fridays that fell like dominoes and left me as far as ever from resolving the issue, or any other issue, for that matter—I found myself cruising the bars in my roommate's company, looking for whatever might be out there. Which wasn't much. This was in northern Westchester, by the way, a place of unupholstered nights and unremitting boredom. We went to one place, then another, clutching sweating drinks in our hands and hoping something we could listen to would come up on the jukebox. I danced a couple of times with a girl in a tight skirt whose legs spoke volumes to me, but nothing came of it—though I practically begged, she wouldn't give me her number.

THE OTHER TWO TEACHERS I KNEW ABOUT WERE BOTH MALE, WHICH WAS THE WAY PEOPLE ASSUMED IT WOULD BE, PREDATOR AND PREY, THE WOLF AND THE LAMB.

Our last resort—Brennan's, a steakhouse with a big semicircular bar that could get lively with people our age once they shut down the kitchen—was enticingly crowded and there was an album we both liked playing at a healthy volume when we walked in the door, so we decided to go up to the bar and order a drink. It took me a minute, scanning the room for people I knew, before I spotted Suzanne and Alec at one of the tables squeezed in the cubbyhole behind the door. It was a table that was familiar to me, one I'd occupied a dozen times myself over the course of the previous summer with Corinda—then my girlfriend, now my ex, who, as far as I knew at the time, had been as happy with me as I was with her.

I didn't react. I might have felt a little punch to the gut, a tightening down there, but I didn't want to embarrass Suzanne—or myself either. I ordered. Stared into my drink. Rob said something. I said something back. The song that just then came on featured a pair of lead guitars doing a kind of mating dance, harmonizing, then breaking away and coming back again, and I was lost in it, bobbing my head and rapping the bar rail with both forefingers, when Suzanne came up and laid a hand on my arm. I turned my head and there she was, with Alec at her side, and far from being embarrassed, they were both grinning as if they'd come there expressly to meet up with me. Suzanne was tall, almost as tall in her heels as Alec, and she was wearing a dress that left her legs exposed from mid-thigh down, which was a different look for her, or different at least from what I'd seen of her at school. I found the view illuminating. As did Rob, who swung around and gaped at her.

"What a surprise seeing you here," she said. "I thought for sure you'd be home taking notes on *The Ancient Mariner*—or what, *Death of a Salesman*?" She let out a quick squeal of a laugh, high on the moment, giddy with this new thing in her life and the aura of sex that hung round her like heat radiating off a hot blacktop road.

"Oh, yeah, well, in fact I was. Actually Rob and I—you know Rob, my roommate I told you about?—spent the whole evening translating Coleridge into Chinese and back again, just for the exercise. Right, Rob?"

Rob was too stunned to grin. He just let his eyes drop to her legs and work their way back up again before he said, "Yeah, sure. Chinese. It's practically my first language."

If I expected Alec to be intimidated or at least circumspect, that wasn't the case at all. He was grinning too and his eyes were lit with the same venereal fire as Suzanne's. He was my height. He outweighed me. He had a beard and I didn't. "Yeah," he said, "I should be home doing my math homework, right? But wait a minute"—he looked from Suzanne to me—"either of you happen to be a math whiz?"

"Afraid you're out of luck," I said, and here we were, the four of us, standing at the bar, *fraternizing*. I wasn't sure how I felt about that. Would I have been happier if Alec didn't exist, if he were shorter, lamer, back at home working on his car or jerking off amid his sports trophies? Or if Suzanne were with me? Or Rob? The drinking age was 18, I reminded myself. Draft age too. What was my problem—we were all adults here, weren't we?

Rob offered to buy them a drink, but Suzanne just shook her head. "No," she said, "we've got things to do, haven't we, Alec?" and I thought they were going to give us a demonstration right there at the bar, but the implication was enough. She half-turned to the door so that her hair swung loose and settled back over her shoulders. "Got to go," she said, and he said, "Later," leaning in for the handshake I reflexively gave him.

After they'd left, Rob turned to me and said, "What do you think? One more?"

I shrugged. We were prolonging the moment, as if to fully absorb it, and I didn't know why. Or maybe I did—at home was the couch. At home was the terminus of Friday night.

The music faded, then started up again. "So that was her?" Rob said, draining his glass and pushing it across the bar for a refill.

I nodded.

"She's"—he took a moment to find the word, weighing the circumstances—"different, huh?"

I felt angry suddenly. I wanted to say *She's headed for trouble* or *She doesn't know what she's getting into,* but I didn't. Who was I to judge? They were both adults, weren't they? "Yeah," I said finally. "You could say that."

• • •

The other two teachers I knew about—or I'd heard the rumors anyway—were both male, which was the way people assumed it would be, predator and prey, the wolf and the lamb and all the rest. One was the drama teacher, whom I didn't know at all but whose opportunities were limitless, what with late-night rehearsals, hands-on direction and the shedding of personae like layers peeled down to the core. The other was a member of the English department, like Suzanne and me, though I was only temporary and he'd been there since he got out of college. Roger was tall, stoop-shouldered, in his late 20s or early 30s—old, that is, by my accounting—and he wore loafers with tassels instead of boots, dressed as if he should be propped up in the window of a department store and sported what was once called a "regular" haircut. I knew him casually, received his formulaic jokes as stoically as I could and found him totally uninteresting but for this one thing, this affair he was having with a girl on the debate team, of which he was the coach. I didn't know her very well either—Elizabeth, or Libby, as everyone called her. She wasn't in any of my classes, but I saw her in the hall with some of the other girls after sixth period every day, when she must have had a class in one of the rooms near mine. If it weren't for the rumors I wouldn't even have noticed her.

She wasn't the first one your eyes would go to in a crowd, but once I caught on I began to see her appeal. She wasn't flashy, always dressed in a turtleneck and skirt or jumper, minimal makeup, minimal jewelry, but she seemed self-contained, confident, and her body—expressive and replete—was right there itching to burst out of her tartans and knee socks. Suzanne had her in her honors class and told me how gifted she was, on track to be salutatorian if not valedictorian and sure to have her choice of colleges, but when I asked her about the rumors—about Roger—she just made a face and shook her head.

"What do you mean?" I pressed. "Is it true?"

We were in the office, at our desks, eating tuna salad sandwiches from the cafeteria and sipping lukewarm coffee. She shook her head again and we both glanced down the row of desks to the one at the far end, where Roger should have been peeling an egg his wife had boiled for him that morning or slurping soup out of a Thermos while thumbing through the sports pages of *The Daily News,* but wasn't. Was he off on one of the debate team's overnight trips? With his young orators, male and female both? With Libby?

"I don't want to talk about it." Suzanne's eyes had gone cold. There was a smear of mayonnaise on her upper lip, which made her face look off-kilter. I was about to reach up with my napkin and brush it away, an intimacy I hadn't earned, but then her tongue found it and it was gone.

"Why not? What's the problem?" I didn't quite get it—she was doing the same thing herself, wasn't she? I wanted gossip. I wanted to be titillated. I wanted to hear it from her lips.

"He's married, for one thing. With kids, little kids, I don't know—two of them, three of them. He's too old for her. He's ruining her. I mean, isn't that enough?"

What her eyes were telling me was that I shouldn't push it, that her situation was utterly different, night and day, that she was in love and Roger Hinckley wasn't and that was all that mattered. I gave it a moment's thought. Roger was a jerk, yes, and marriage, at least as I viewed it then, was like some sort of prison sentence, but still I didn't quite see the distinction.

"What about Alec?"

"What about him?"

One of the other teachers, an older woman named Tammy, pushed through the door then, gave us an automatic smile and began extracting her lunch from a paper bag decorated with grease stains. We both fell silent a moment, then I said, "I don't know—isn't it kind of the same thing? Not that I'm saying anything, but you know the way people are, you know what they say."

"No," she said, "what *do* they say?"

I looked down the row of desks, past Tammy and her meatball wedge and diet soda, to where Roger's desk stood empty. "I don't know—same thing they say about Roger."

"You know what?" She balled up her half-eaten sandwich and flung it in the wastebasket in the same motion.

"What?"

"Screw people," she said. "Really, screw them."

• • •

We had a succession of sunstruck days that fall, Indian summer, but nobody had a chance to enjoy them because we were all stuck inside, racing like gerbils around the academic wheel—and on the weekends, without fail, it rained. I met a girl or two along the way—in bars, where else?—but nobody I could talk to. They were secretaries, receptionists, waitresses, the ones left behind after graduation when their cohort went off to college. Not that I was looking for anything long-term, but no matter how compelling their faces were, their hair, their bodies, or how enormous my need, nothing seemed to click. Rob, out of desperation, had begun making the long dark hurtling journey up the thruway to be with his girlfriend on weekends, so most of the time I didn't even have him there to distract me from myself. And yes, there were girls in my classes who were as smart and funny and well put-together as you could ask for, girls not much younger than I, but nothing happened there either, though I had Suzanne's example before me, not to mention Roger's and the drama teacher's and God knew who else's. Was I a rock? A saint? A model teacher? Would I have slipped if the opportunity had presented itself? I don't know. Truly, I don't.

The weeks piled up like drift. Somebody told me Mrs. Leitner was never coming back, and it was as if I'd been given a life sentence for crimes I'd never committed. The students wrote essays; I corrected them. I gave up smoking and started in again a week later. Beers, multiples of them, in six-packs or served up in foaming glasses on one bar top or another, were my counters. Then there came a night in November, another Friday, the leaves gone from the trees and a cold rain rattling the gutters, when things suddenly shifted on me.

By the time I got home Rob was already gone, charging up the thruway while radio stations faded in and out and the tires hissed beneath him. He was on a mission, and the thought of that—and of his girlfriend, Lee Ann, with her pouting underlip and swollen brassieres—just depressed me. I had a beer. Ate something out of a can. I was watching TV with the sound off, killing time till it was late enough to make the rounds of the bars—albeit alone, like some sort of outcast—when the bell rang. This was an unusual circumstance. The bell never rang—it was just Rob and me in the apartment, and I couldn't imagine anybody actually mounting the front steps and pressing the buzzer, unless it was some official, a cop, that is, alerted to the smell of marijuana or fielding a noise complaint because the stereo was cranked up to the maximum. But I wasn't smoking marijuana (not that night anyway, or at least not yet) and I hadn't put any music on, preferring to sit in silence and watch the shapes shift on the screen in a parody of desolation.

It was Suzanne at the door. Her hair was wet, her mascara smeared and her coat hanging open to display her legs in that same dress she'd worn at the bar—or one just like it. She didn't say hi or apologize for barging in on me or explain that she'd found my address in the faculty listings, just brushed by me the minute I opened the door, stalked to the middle of the room and swung round on me. "Have you got anything to drink?" she asked, her voice strained and theatrical. "Please tell me you have something, anything, because——" she broke off, as if suddenly aware of how intrusive all this was—or maybe that was play-acting too. "I just—can I sit down?"

"Yes, sure," I said, "of course," and watched her wriggle out of the wet coat before crossing the room and sinking into the couch. She didn't seem to know what to do with the coat—I should have offered to take it, but a fog of confusion had settled over me. After a moment, she dropped it discreetly on the floor at her feet. "I've got beer," I said. "You want a beer?"

"You don't have anything stronger?"

"I think that's about it. Rob had a bottle of vodka in the freezer, but I think we——"

She waved me off. "Beer's fine."

When I came back into the room with the beer she was sitting cross-legged on the couch, working her fingers through her wet hair. She took the bottle from me and drained half of it in a gulp, then gave me a self-referential smile as if she'd just realized where she was. "You wouldn't have a towel I could borrow, would you? And maybe a hairbrush?"

What had happened—what had brought her here, to me—was potentially catastrophic. Libby's parents had begun to field rumors about their daughter's relationship with the debate coach, which both Libby and Roger denied out of hand, but the principal was involved now and the chair of the English department and, last Suzanne had heard, even the police. "They could get him for rape, you know that, right?"

I was seated in the armchair across from her, my own beer propped up on one knee. "Rape? I thought they were—I mean, it's consensual, right?"

"Statutory. She's under 18."

I didn't really know what that meant or how to make the distinction, but Roger Hinckley's haphazard face suddenly rose up before me and I felt a dark surge of joy. I didn't dislike him, but I didn't really like him either.

"Tammy's saying he's going to have to take a leave of absence." Suzanne patted her hair with the towel I'd fetched from the bathroom, a towel that could have been cleaner and could have smelled better too, but I was doing the best I could. "Really," she said, her voice gone hollow, "I don't know what to do."

I wanted to say, *What do you care?* but I could see where this was going and I liked the way she looked sitting there on my couch—Rob's couch—in her moment of extremity. I said, "Alec's 18, right? So you don't have anything to worry about."

"Except my job. Roger's got tenure, but me? They could just fire me."

"For what?"

"There's a morals clause in our contract, isn't there?"

"I don't know, I never read it. You mean the 'Don't-Fuck-the-Students' clause?"

"It's not funny."

"I'm not trying to be funny."

There was a moment then in which we both tried to gather ourselves, a moment we needed to get past. It was raining still. The images flickered across the TV screen. I took a sip of my beer, then set it down on the coffee table. "What does Alec have to say about it?"

"We broke up. Over the phone, if you can believe it. He said we couldn't risk it—he said *I* couldn't risk it—and all I could say was 'I love you' over and over. Isn't that pathetic? I mean, he's being more mature about it than me."

"Maybe nothing'll happen," I said.

She got up and crossed the room to me then, perched on the arm of the chair and leaned in close so I could feel the wet strands of her hair curtaining my neck and shoulders. "It already has," she said.

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On Monday, there was a stranger sitting at Roger's desk, a hammy old man with a long nose and rheumy blue eyes who was probably gay, though I didn't know anything about gay in those days either—I'm not even sure the term had been repurposed yet. But there he was, Phil Leicester, looking and sounding like a bit player from *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* the traveling production, propped up in Roger Hinckley's chair and talking nonstop to anyone who would listen. I wasn't listening. We'd made our introductions when I came in and then I'd gone straight to my desk, trying frantically to put something together for my first-period class, which I should have done the night before but hadn't.

The night before I'd been at a bar—at several bars—and stayed late, drinking alone. I wouldn't admit to being depressed over what had happened Friday night, or worse, Saturday morning, but that was the fact. Suzanne had stayed over and we'd made love (or had sex, that is) in Rob's bed, which was all right, which was fine—I liked her, we were friends, I was needy and so was she—until the next morning. The minute she opened her eyes she said, "Oh my God, what am I doing?" She was up out of bed before I could so much as reach out to her, pulling on her dress with her back to me. "I'm so sorry," she said. "I didn't mean—forgive me, will you? Please, please, please?"

I wanted to say, *There's nothing to forgive,* wanted to say, *Let me take you out for breakfast at least* or *I've wanted to do that for a long time and let's do it again, now, right now,* but she was already gone. Out the door, down the steps and into her canary yellow VW Bug with the heart sticker on the rear bumper.

And now, on this morning when a total stranger, wearing a bow tie of all things, had taken Roger's place, Suzanne wasn't at her desk. Which seemed ominous. Not that I was all that eager to sit there elbow-to-elbow with her—what had happened Saturday morning filled me with shame and anger—but the fact was she could lose her job too. Or already had lost it. And what would they do to her—tar and feathers? Criminal charges? What did the morals clause say anyway? And where was she? It wasn't like her to be late.

As it turned out she'd taken a sick day and driven up to Rhinebeck with Alec, who'd likewise skipped school, and they'd stayed overnight at the hotel there, where nobody would know them. The next day she was back at her desk, making notes in her copy of *The Odyssey,* which was required reading for her world literature class, acting as if nothing had happened. She didn't avoid my eyes, just glanced up with a smile, said hello in her soft puff of a voice and caught me up on the details as if Friday night and Saturday morning had never happened. She was in love with Alec, and that was all there was to it, and she was sorry if she'd given me the wrong idea. "Anyway," she said, "I was in a state. I mean, all I could think was the worst——"

I didn't have anything to say to this.

"But really, the focus is on Roger—what he was doing was wrong. And I hate to say it, but he should have known better. Have you ever met his wife? No? Well, she's pretty, very pretty, and the kids are, I don't know, *kids.*"

I watched her lips move. She wasn't talking to me, she was talking at me, talking as if I cared—and I didn't care, not anymore. I said, "What about you—aren't you afraid you're going to be next?"

She shook her head, dropped her eyes to the page. I watched her make a notation in the margin, as if the Greeks were what moved her. "We're going to go underground, at least till after graduation." A complicit smile. "No more Brennan's. Or any other place within 20 miles of here."

I was bitter—I couldn't help it. She wasn't my type, as I said, but four nights ago she had been. "Just stay at home, huh?"

Her smile widened till I could see the glint of a gold-capped molar. "Yeah," she said, and her eyes never left mine, even when Tammy and two of the other teachers came in the door and brought all the racket of the hallway with them. "That's the best part."

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The department chair, whose office was separate from ours and whom we hardly ever saw except during meetings, was out shoveling snow in his driveway after an early December storm when his left side went numb and he pitched face-forward onto the frozen pavement. He might have lain there till he froze to death but for the quick thinking of his next-door neighbor, who saw what had happened and went out and cradled him in her lap till the ambulance came. The upshot was that Tammy, who was a 42-year-old divorcée and wore her hair in coppery beauty-parlor ringlets, was appointed temporary chair, nominally in charge of us and our affairs, though the real power was invested in the principal, and beyond him, the superintendent, who'd put Roger Hinckley on unpaid leave till things could be sorted out. As far as I knew, Roger hadn't been arrested, so there was that at least, but the administration was aroused, and what had once been an open secret was buried so deeply even the drama teacher was forsaking after-school activities—beyond rehearsing the plays themselves, that is.

All this had a chilling effect, to say the least. Suzanne and Alec wouldn't so much as glance at each other in the hallway, and in the class he was taking from her—creative writing—they kept things on a strictly formal basis. Or that was what I'd heard. The fact was, I didn't get to talk with her all that much at this juncture—she'd asked to switch to Tammy's desk once Tammy had vacated it for the chair's office, and why she'd asked I could only speculate, since she was done confiding in me. Did she feel as uncomfortable around me as I felt around her? Did she feel guilty? Like a slut? A hypocrite? All of the above? She tried to make a joke of it—"I just need to be closer to the door in case they come for me with a lynch mob"—but it was bogus and we both knew it. "We can still have our miserable crumbs of lunch together once in a while—it's not like I'm moving over to the math department or anything," she said, but I wasn't having it. "Yeah, sure," I said.

What I want to make clear here, for the record, is that I was not the one who typed up the anonymous note on the IBM Selectric in Tammy's office and slipped it in the principal's mail slot in the main office after everyone had gone home one afternoon, though no one believes that, least of all Suzanne. She had some explaining to do (lying, that is) and so did Alec when they were called separately into the office and grilled by the principal, Mike Blumenthal, who had a thug's face and was as innocent of intellect as anybody I've ever met. What happened? Nothing, as far as I could see. Suzanne was a woman and women got a free pass in those days.

I kept my head down. I needed the job because the job meant

UNDER MY FINGERS, HER SKIN SEEMED HOT TO THE TOUCH. IT TOOK ME TWO TRIES, BUT THEN I GOT THE ZIPPER DOWN.

money and the money was like a drug. I started helping Rob out with the rent and saving up for my own place because when Lee Ann graduated at the end of the year, she was planning on moving in with him, which left me precisely nowhere. Thanksgiving found me at my mother's house, bored right down to the soles of my feet. There was a hard freeze. Everything smelled of exhaust fumes. Then it was Christmas, and what Christmas meant, beyond the onslaught of syrupy tunes tinkling out of every speaker in existence and the conundrum of what to get for my mother, who already had enough perfume to float a canoe, was the department Christmas party.

A Friday night, yes—one more Friday night. Tammy, as acting chair, hosted the affair at her house, which was at the dead and final end of a rat maze of unlighted streets and looked no different from the 200 or so exact replicas I had to drive past to get there. I was 23. I didn't know protocol—or even good manners, for that matter. I brought nothing but myself to the party, though the others, I saw, had offered up various dishes—a tuna casserole, chili beans, a mold of Jell-O with grapes embedded in it—and even flowers for the hostess. I knew at least half the people there, my colleagues, but most of them had spouses with them, and that was a kind of ordeal I hadn't factored in when I made my calculations as to whether to attend or not. The attraction was the free food and booze—everybody drank in those days, and drank heavily—and I figured I'd get tanked at the party and then go on out and make the rounds of the places where somebody might have registered an actual heartbeat.

I was well into it, having put away two plates of food and three or four scotch and sodas and politely endured the posturing of the various spouses, one of whom took me for a student, when Suzanne came hurtling through the front door in high heels and an ankle-length coat wrapped around one of her extracurricular dresses. She was late, the last one to the party, and she whirled around the room, spouting jokes and excuses until she was sure everybody was watching her before she slipped off her coat to reveal the dress. Which looked good on her. Very good. My perceptions were dulled, but when she went up to embrace Tammy over the makeshift bar with its punch bowl and dented ice bucket, I saw that Tammy was wearing the same dress—or one that wasn't much different, though Tammy's was red and Suzanne's green, as if they'd color-coordinated beforehand. It was just a moment, a quick embrace of the two women while people turned back to whatever they were saying and one of the endless corny records provided a musical backdrop, but it made an impression on me—or Tammy did—in a way that left me confused. She was my mother's age and here she was wearing the same dress as the girl who'd slept with me in Rob's bed and avoided me ever since, and what was all that about?

Eventually, after she'd made the rounds, Suzanne did come up to me, as if it were an afterthought—or worse, an obligation. She was wearing a serene smile that told me Alec was waiting for her back at the apartment and that the reason she was late didn't have anything to do with Christmas shopping or traffic or the ice on the roads. "Having fun?" she asked, the old edge of sarcasm in her voice.

"It's better than Woodstock," I said. "Have you met all the spouses yet? Like"—I nodded to a man across the room who was wearing a sweater that looked as if it had been knitted by the blind—"*Mr.* Kathy McCaffrey?"

She laughed. "No, but before it's over, I'm sure I will." She gave me a look then that rose from my scuffed boots to my jeans and the leather jacket I'd been affecting lately, and let her face go serious for a moment. "And how are you? Everything okay? I mean, I hardly get to see you anymore, what with the rush around the office and the holidays coming on——"

I shrugged. What did she want me to say? That I missed her? Was she really that venal? "I didn't write that letter, you know," I said.

She kept her eyes on me, the steadiest gaze in the world. I didn't want to flinch, because I was innocent, I was, but I had to look away. Across the room, one of the other young teachers, Matt Ricci, was mouthing the words to "White Christmas," the song that was just then laboring through the speakers of Tammy's ancient hi-fi like some sort of tribal dirge. "Yeah," she said finally, "okay," and she was already turning her back on me, her bare shoulders, hair in motion, her thighs. "You take care," she said. "And Merry Christmas."

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I should have left then, but inertia had set in and the next drink sat like a barbell across my shoulders. Suzanne found her coat, thanked Tammy in dumb show while Bing Crosby or one of his accomplices—Nat King Cole—obliterated all sense and meaning, and then vanished into the night. The party began to wind down. Phil Leicester, who'd been lighting one cigarette off another all night and laughing at his own jokes in the register of a wounded animal, finally took his sagging face out to his car, then the McCaffreys left and I pushed myself up from the couch in a kind of panic, counting only six people left standing. It was almost nine o'clock. I had appointments to keep—or at least make. I was wondering how to extricate myself, debating whether to hit the bathroom and slip out the back door or suck it up and thank our hostess, who would after all be evaluating me at some point in the coming term, for the great time I'd had, when there she was, Tammy, standing right beside me in her dress with the thin shoulder straps that was just like Suzanne's but for the color.

"You're not leaving, are you?" She waved a watery cocktail in one hand, then brought a cigarette to her lips with the other.

I told her I was meeting somebody at Brennan's. "At"—I made a show of looking at my watch—"9:30?"

"Bullshit," she said. "I know you—you're just going home to what, didn't you tell me, a couch? Come on, one more drink. And if you want to know, I could use some help cleaning up too."

"No, really, I'm supposed to meet somebody——"

"A girl?"

My mind was full of sludge. The lie couldn't break free of it. "Yeah," I said.

"What's her name?"

I couldn't think. She was right there, watching me. "Suzanne."

"Suzanne? Not *our* Suzanne?"

"No," I said, and I didn't know how much she knew, "another Suzanne."

"Okay," she said, "but she can wait, can't she? It's not even nine yet—and I really could use some help here." She slipped an arm around my waist as if we were out on a dance floor, and it was the first time we'd ever made physical contact, beyond maybe a handshake when we'd first met, if that. "Come on, one more drink?"

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After the others left I went dutifully around the room, dumping ashtrays, gathering up bottles and cans for the trash and hauling trays of dishes, glasses and silverware out to the kitchen, where Tammy stood at the sink, a pair of yellow rubber gloves clinging to her bare arms. She'd fixed me a final drink—for the road—and I'd stationed it on the bar, where I could refer to it as I went back and forth. I was drunk enough that my thought processes pretty well shut down and everything became usual, as if all my life had narrowed to this point of rudimentary usefulness. The music persisted, "O Little Town of Bethlehem" and the like, but it operated on me now like a kind of anesthesia, the world washed free of pain, loneliness, hurt, anger. Tammy was in the kitchen. The music flowed. I transported objects, one after another, until the only thing left was the punch bowl, a cut-glass receptacle the size of a birdbath identical to the one my mother kept on the top shelf of the pantry at home. I took it in both arms, lifted it from the bar with all its dregs of brutalized lemons and limes and discolored fruit juice sloshing merrily against my chest, and backed my way in through the swinging door to the kitchen, where Tammy, craning her neck over one shoulder, admonished me to be careful. "That was my mother's," she called out, and in the next moment she was coming across the room, her arms outstretched, to take it from me.

I didn't drop it. That would have been too easy. No, I shifted it gently into her arms, her face inches from mine—both of us on the same page, concentrating hard—but the physics of the transaction caused some of the liquid, viscid with its load of citrus and sugar, to splash over the rim and dribble down the front of her dress. She let out a soft curse and then the bowl was on the counter and we were looking at each other in a way that might have been hilarious under other circumstances. But this wasn't hilarious, this was something else I was just in that moment beginning to understand. I watched her drop her chin to peer down the front of her dress in disbelief. The liquid had darkened the material in a spreading stain that was shading from red to maroon, and my first impulse was to make amends, dab at it with something, paper towels, a wet cloth, but I just stood there watching her as her eyes rose gradually to mine. "I guess I'll be making a trip to the dry cleaner's after work Monday," she said.

"What about a wet cloth? Isn't that what you're supposed to——"

She sighed, peeling back the rubber gloves. "And I really liked this dress too. The minute I tried it on I said to myself, 'Tammy, this is you, it really is,' and with my figure it isn't always easy to find something to fit right, believe me—but here, help me, will you?"

She'd turned around, fumbling with the zipper the way my mother did when she got home from work and couldn't decide whether to change first or make herself a drink. I did what I was told. Under my fingers, her skin seemed hot to the touch, though maybe that was my imagination. It took me two tries, but then I got the zipper down to the point where she could reach back and manipulate it herself, which she did with a soft frictive release that was the only sound in the whole house because the Christmas records—I realized it in that instant—had finally played themselves out. I took a step back, just to give her space, but she turned to face me, to look into my eyes, before she eased the dress down to her waist and I saw that she wasn't wearing anything under it.

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The truth? I did what I had to, what was expected, though when it was over I pulled on my jeans and went straight out to my car. Yes, I was drunk, but it seemed I was always drunk in those days, and nobody ever thought twice about driving under the influence, least of all me. The headlights were a revelation: They opened up the road to me and the road took me home. To Rob's. Where I poured out a beer I couldn't finish, tried to watch something on the TV and fell down hard into a black dreamless sleep. The next day my head hurt and I stayed in the shower so long the water began to go cold, after which I flipped through the channels, stared at a book I couldn't concentrate on and went to the movies, alone. I didn't go out that night, though it was Saturday and Saturdays were almost as precious as Fridays. Sunday was gray, cold, bleak. Then it was Monday and Rob was in his bed, snoring, when the alarm went off. I spent a long time staring into the bathroom mirror in my underwear thinking of what it was going to be like to see Suzanne and Tammy there in the office or the hallway, and the students too—Libby, who'd never missed a class though her coach was in exile, and Alec, who fingered his beard and carried himself like an astronaut just setting foot on earth again. Then I went to the phone and called in sick. I called in sick the day after that and then the following day until there was no point in calling anymore.

It was no great tragedy. I hadn't wanted to be an educator in the first place—it was just a job, that was all. What I missed most was the paycheck, but that took care of itself in a way that wedded need and serendipity. It happened that one of the bartenders at Brennan's quit to go back to school and since by that point I'd become not only a regular but a kind of prodigy of drink, hyperbole and free-form bar banter, the manager took me on as second bartender, three nights a week. It was hardly a career, but I accepted it for what it was—a place marker—and on most nights, even the slow ones, there were usually a couple of girls sitting at the bar gossiping over their brandy alexanders and tequila sunrises, watching my every move. ■

wild in love

kylie jenner by travis scott

She knows how to capture the gaze of hundreds of millions, but only a select few—those she allows to get close—know her from a different perspective. A rare, intimate glimpse into the life of the 22-year-old mogul, as directed and interviewed by her partner

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
SASHA SAMSONOVA

TRAVIS SCOTT: We're on the set of our photo shoot for PLAYBOY. Did you think you would ever be here?

KYLIE JENNER: I never thought that I would pose for PLAYBOY, but I love the new covers. I love what PLAYBOY is doing right now creatively, and when you presented me with the idea—that you would be behind the cover and creative direction and be in control of the images—I thought it was a perfect fit, because I trust you and your vision.

SCOTT: We're shooting for the magazine's Pleasure Issue. What does the word *pleasure* mean to you?

JENNER: I get pleasure in doing things that people say I can't do.

SCOTT: I would definitely say you've broken boundaries as a celebrity who is also a mogul. Would you agree?

JENNER: Yes, but I still have miles to go. But I am really proud of myself for the things I've accomplished and worked hard for.

SCOTT: Can you talk about a memory when you feel like you exceeded expectations?

JENNER: I feel like the cover of *Forbes* was a huge moment when I exceeded expectations. That was a huge moment for me that was great recognition for everything I've done.

SCOTT: Does the recognition change the way you live your life?

JENNER: It really motivates me to be the best version of me I can be and to inspire young people to go achieve their goals at any age.

SCOTT: It doesn't really feel like you're done yet with expanding your brand. I overheard you talking the other day. Were you talking about wines and linens?

JENNER: I haven't started on wine and bed linens, but I think you probably overheard us trademarking everything in different categories so that if I ever decide to come out with wine or bed linens, it'll be set up. After we built Kylie Cosmetics, I feel like I found a passion in building from the ground up and creating businesses and new companies. Now that I know the whole process really well, it comes easily to me and it's really fun and definitely a passion of mine. We just launched Kylie Skin not too long ago, and it has been a huge success. I can't wait to keep expanding and creating new things.

SCOTT: When I need to bounce new ideas off of someone, I always know I can go to you. Do you feel the same about me?

JENNER: I definitely come to you! I don't really come to you for what lipstick color I should come out with next month, but I do come to you for the creative side. Remember the other day, when I was like, "I don't know how to promote my birthday collection"? You have such a creative, out-of-the-box mind, so I love to come to you to get some advice on how to promote things, because you always have the craziest, coolest ideas.

SCOTT: Why do you think our relationship works? And why do you think we knew it worked so quickly?

JENNER: We think the same and we have the same goals and passions in life. Besides the fact that we have good chemistry, we have a lot of fun together. You're my best friend. Through all the ups and downs that every relationship has, we evolve together through them and keep getting stronger.

SCOTT: A lot of people claim that having a baby can hurt your sex life, but I feel like that's the opposite of our experience.

JENNER: Yeah, I feel like we've definitely proven that rumor to be wrong. [*laughs*]

SCOTT: And the way you embrace your sexuality hasn't changed with motherhood either. Do you feel like I empower you to own your identity and sexuality as a mom?

JENNER: You remind me that motherhood and sexuality can coexist and just because you embrace your sexuality doesn't mean you have loose morals or you're not a good mother. You can be sexy and still be a badass mom.

SCOTT: I feel like you're enjoying life no matter what obstacle is thrown at you. What would your advice be to your followers on how to enjoy life?

JENNER: There are definitely a lot of obstacles thrown at me, and I've heard every negative thing anyone could say about me under the sun. Being a huge presence on social media, you open yourself up to gossip about yourself and false stories—but a lot of positive too. All the positive comes with the negative stuff, and I just know myself. I know how far I can be pushed. I know my strength, and I know when to put down my phone and get off social media and just enjoy life. I do see myself as a really strong person and just to remain positive and try to find those core positive people in your life and stay close to your family and the people who want to see you do the best.

SCOTT: On your Instagram, you talked recently about self-care and admitted that the image you present to the world just scrapes the surface. What made you want to write that and how did that advice come to you?

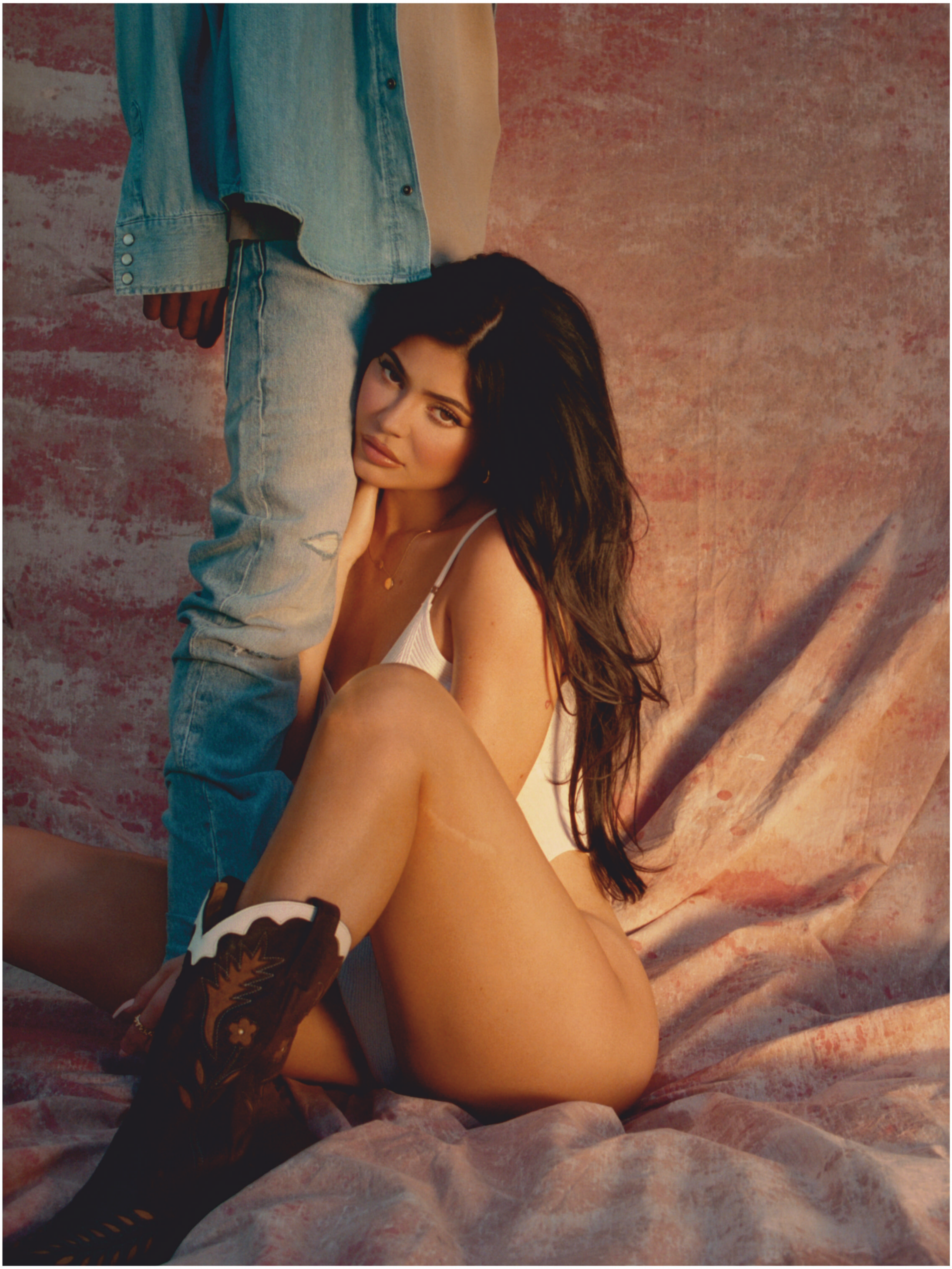
JENNER: I actually just love writing and putting together words, so when I got into my emotions, I was just writing in my notes and I sent it to one of my best friends and said, "I just wrote this. Do you think I should put it as my caption?" And she said, "I just cried. You need to post this." So she kind of encouraged me to post it. Writing just helps me feel better and express myself.

SCOTT: How do you make sure to take care of yourself?

JENNER: I have good faith. I remain positive. I only keep positive people and positive energy around me, and I practice positive thoughts. I stay close to my family and love family time—and a good skincare routine.

SCOTT: And then there are our days off together.

JENNER: When we have our days off, we play with Stormi all day, and the three of us have a lot of fun together. We do a lot of swimming; Stormi loves swimming, so we're always in the pool or playing in her room or taking her out to lunch with us. After she falls asleep, we watch a lot of TV and we get lost in the theater room and just watch a whole lot of shows and movies. We usually fight over what TV show we're going to watch. We have a lot of fun together. We're always laughing or getting into deep talks. ■



OPENING PAGE, ON JENNER: DRESS BY VALERJ POBEGA, PANTIES BY I.D. SARRIERI, RINGS BY BARE COLLECTION; ON SCOTT: JACKET AND PANTS BY DIOR, RINGS BY CHROME HEARTS. PREVIOUS SPREAD, RIGHT, ON JENNER: DRESS BY HOUSE OF CB, RINGS BY LE VIAN, BORGIONI AND MARCO BICEGO; ON SCOTT: JACKET AND PANTS BY DIOR, VINTAGE T-SHIRT BY FOR ALL TO ENVY. THIS PAGE, ON JENNER: BODYSUIT BY HOUSE OF CB, BOOTS BY LOBLAN, EARRINGS BY AMBER SCEATS, NECKLACE BY BARE COLLECTION, RINGS BY MARTHA CALVO, ÂME AND BORGIONI; ON SCOTT: SHIRT AND JEANS BY LEVI'S, T-SHIRT BY JOHN ELLIOTT.

FACE-TO-FACE WITH

TORO Y MOI

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **MANCY GANT**

The multitalented musician rode the crest of chillwave, then dove headfirst into exploring creativity and the joy of connection

BY **ANDREA DOMANICK**

"Wanna go up on the roof?" Chaz Bear asks me with a puckish grin.

His gusto catches me off guard. It has been a long day here at Company, the art studio and record label that Bear, otherwise known as experimental music act Toro y Moi, founded in Oakland, California. Last night he was here producing new music till five A.M., only to return hours later for a packed itinerary that includes being photographed, filmed and interviewed by PLAYBOY. As he heads into the last portion (it's now near sunset), Bear's energy hasn't wavered, and he's eager for me to see more of his world.

Reaching up, he pops a heavy circular access door installed above industrial pipes. A column of light pours in and bathes the rear of Company's second-floor recording studio. The opening, barely wider than his shoulders, resembles a submarine escape hatch. Passing through it requires some skilled scrambling between a ladder and a metal power box on the wall. Bear ascends, his legs dangling comically before he hoists himself up.

"You coming?" he asks, flashing that same grin. There's no knowing what lies above. But because Bear is a virtuoso—his creative exploits have positioned him as one of today's most daring and inspired cross-platform artists—chasing him into the sunset is a welcome pursuit.

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A decade has passed since Bear, now 32, breached pop-cultural consciousness as Toro y Moi, a solo project birthed in a dorm room by a South Carolina–raised skater misfit who loved J Dilla and Panda Bear. The hypnagogic pop sound and anxiously lackadaisical disposition of his 2010 debut LP, *Causers of This,* earned him a cult following and helped usher in a rapidly hyped musical movement called chillwave—a microgenre marked by nostalgia, escapism and glazed resignation. The embrace of chillwave and its theme of youthful abandonment was no doubt bolstered by 2008's fraught climate of recession and high unemployment.

But chillwave's star burned hot and fast, eventually cooling in the face of early-2010s hipster malaise. In retrospect, even if Toro y Moi is considered a progenitor of the genre, the association discounts the stylistically omnivorous explorations of his succeeding eight studio albums, two mixtapes and three EPs—releases fueled not by trends but by his love for exploration.

Today, Toro y Moi is just one facet of Chaz Bear, an artist whose imagination is central to his holistic identity and whose accomplishments read more like career-test results than a boilerplate biography. He's Chazwick Bradley Bear, né Bundick—singer, songwriter, producer, graphic designer, painter and album-cover artist; founder of Company Records; DJ and purveyor of dance music as Les Sins; collaborator with Travis Scott, Flying Lotus and Tyler, the Creator (among others); honoree of "Chaz Bundick Day" as bestowed by Berkeley's mayor; and workaholic by his own admission.

"I noticed that before my work got to where it is now, I was seeking pleasure in the creative process, in the genres I was seeking to re-create," Bear tells me. "The romance has shifted from the creative part to the enjoyment of people's expressions."

That shift is a hallmark of Toro y Moi's latest, this year's *Outer Peace.* The album not only marks Toro y Moi's sharpest stylistic turn yet—slinky R&B production, electronic dance beats and wide-eyed storytelling—it's also a thematic examination of Bear himself and his belief that one's artistic energy and potential are bound to the connections we share with the world around us.

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Back on Company's rooftop: "Sometimes, on a clear day without all the fog, you can see the Golden Gate," Bear says, gesturing in the haze. Contrary to my expectations, the roof—an expanse of tar paper and stucco strewn with bottle caps—is unremarkable. What is remarkable is what surrounds it. The cascading hills of Berkeley and Kensington are to the northeast. A BART train careers by, the grid of residential Oakland beams in the low sun and peaks of construction protrude into the San Francisco skyline.

Surrounded by almost a dozen studios in this industrial arts complex, Company's patch of roof suggests humility. For Bear, it's an improvised island of escape from the mental and emotional grind below.

"This is just another normal day here at Company—this kind of thing, these people around," Bear says about the day's events. "It's fine; I love it. But if you're trying to wrap up a project, you can't really think here."

Only recently has Bear come to understand that embracing creative control also means knowing when to relinquish it. "Honestly, I didn't learn about taking care of myself until, like, three years ago. I didn't do things for my own emotional enjoyment until I was single again," he says, referring to his short-lived break from partner Samantha Beardsley. (The two are now married; they both took the "Bear" surname when they wed.) "You have to live through that. I was getting more and more depressed when I was making [2017's] *Boo Boo.* My brain wouldn't stop moving, and I couldn't get away from the computer. Like, Damn, I gotta design this, I gotta write this up, I gotta tech this thing. I was giving

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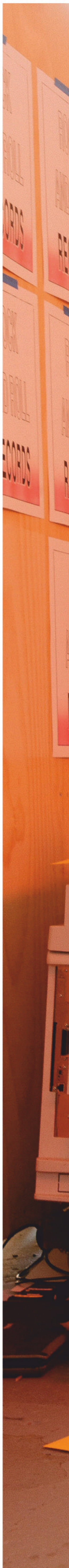


ROCK AND ROLL RECORDS

myself all the work and never being like, Okay, maybe you should just sleep in today."

Living in Portland at the time of *Boo Boo*'s release, Bear skipped touring the new album—known to be the most lucrative part of a musician's career—to take up painting and hiking and to travel down to the Bay Area to embed himself in the art scene there. "I never gave myself a support system, and you need that for when you don't have your person," he says. "I had to force myself to stop being so introverted and just go make friends, because you're gonna drive yourself crazy."

When he moved back to Oakland in 2017, he formally opened Company Records. Ten years after Toro y Moi's inception, Bear is still DIY, but he's swapped his dorm room for a label and an incubator. Today, Company includes a print shop, a recording studio, a rehearsal space and a gallery, all of which are accessible to local artists. Providing such resources allows Bear to step out of the spotlight while retaining creative control, but it also means his lone-wolf endeavors have to take a backseat.

Despite (or maybe because of) his penchant for putting in overtime, personal retreats have emerged as an essential part of his creative process. Last year he decamped to a writer's cabin outside San Francisco to complete *Outer Peace*. There, amid the solitude, wood paneling and a mounted cow's skull, he took stock of the work he'd produced while in existential free-fall.

"*Outer Peace* is successful because I got a chance to love every step of the process," he says. "Before, it was kind of a burden. Now I just got to play creative director."

Bear's voice takes on a quiet reverence as he reflects on the building's surrounding arts community, which inspired Company's communal approach to making art. "The whole reason I moved back from Portland was because I got grandfathered into this spot when my friend moved away," he says a little breathlessly. "It's all just iconic artists. Just amazing shit."

Behind us sits a row of studios, the windows of which offer glimpses into the practices of printers, metalworkers, sculptors and painters, many of whom, Bear says, have been tenants since the rent-controlled complex popped up in the 1970s. "These guys are like OG. That's why I feel so honored to have this space. They're of that era, the beatniks who moved here," he says. "That movement influenced this area to become a hub of open minds. You feel more at home here."

The older generations of artists who've endured also recharge Bear, even if he's aware that the playing field has changed. There has never been a more paradoxical time to be an artist: Hyperconnectivity is at war with cultural disconnection. More money is being exchanged by fewer hands. Corporate power precludes bottom-up innovation, forcing fringe industries to exist on their own terms and to rely on one another for community.

"You have to brand yourself. That's what it comes down to. It sucks, but it's no different than being the local real estate guy who's got his picture on every bench," Bear says. "If you're going to give yourself away, why not put it into your work?"

For his part, Bear has come a long way from the milieu that launched his career. No matter his and his veteran neighbors' aspirations, he recognizes they can control only what they produce. And they recognize that honing their skills, if focused enough, can only lead to beautiful results. "We just want to make things that help us connect," he says. "If that's the motive, what it's going to come down to is that face-to-face interaction is still going to hold value in the future."

Face-to-face connections are valuable because they can't be co-opted, of course. Ultimately, they're reminders of the control we have over the world that surrounds us. It's not much, but maybe that's just fine.

"I see myself as a local shop owner. I don't aspire to take over the industry or anything. I just want to do good and serve who I can within my reach," he says. "And take it one step at a time. It has sort of been my approach this whole time. It's just building something in town."

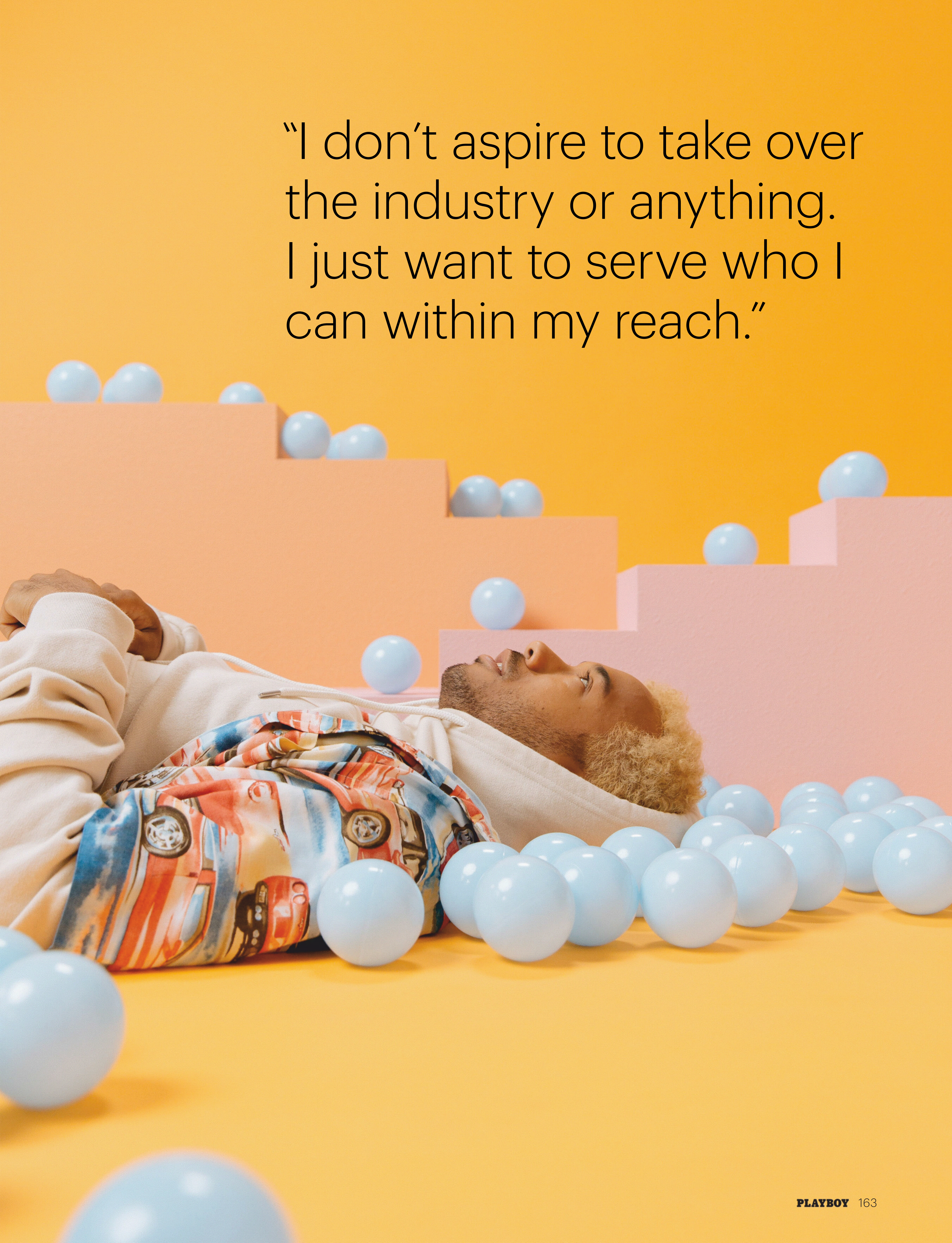
As we lower ourselves back into the studio, Bear asks me if I'm hungry. "I'm kind of starving," he says.

We hastily gather our things to get to the restaurants before they close. Bear does a final sweep, locking doors, shutting cabinets, powering down equipment and switching off lights. The complex's heavy steel doors latch shut behind us with a decisive thud.

"Shit," Bear says, pivoting. He's forgotten his keys.

His co-workers left hours ago, so we have to wait for a superintendent to let us in. I wander outside the complex's communal garden, where the branches of a small tree hang heavy with plums.

He plucks one and hands it to me. The flavor is floral and honey sweet, unusual and familiar. We stand there, feasting on plums and laughing at the absurdity. It's not what we'd planned, but it's satisfying just the same. ■



“I don’t aspire to take over the industry or anything. I just want to serve who I can within my reach.”

this is your brain on **euphoria**

Neuroaesthetics sets out to understand what the human mind deems beautiful. Can we trust this new experimental field of science—and the corporations wielding it?

BY **DAISY ALIOTO**

Imagine waking up in an apartment expertly curated by a voice-controlled intelligent personal assistant. Everything from the artwork on the walls to the cutlery in the kitchen has been selected based on what your brain perceives to be most beautiful. The lighting is custom designed. It soothes you by appealing to Homo sapiens' earliest evolutionary memories: the tranquil hues of a savanna at sunrise. You are surrounded by verdant plants, of course, because humans find plants calming.

You walk into the bathroom and call up a playlist through a smart speaker that produces the crispest notes and zero white noise. The tunes excite you and prepare you for a productive day, and every time a new song plays, the reward center in your brain lights up. Your apartment's smart speakers also tell you when to eat breakfast; your refrigerator is stocked with healthy meals that have been exquisitely plated and chemically hacked to derive the same response.

You scroll through a dating app that has already selected candidates based on the physical features a brain-imaging study determined you find most attractive.

Your virtual assistant records the space 24/7 to help you tweak your environment. It tells you when to reposition the chairs to increase the room's feng shui. It tells you what you find interesting, what your brain finds beautiful, what is art.

Is this science fiction, or is life by design and hyperaesthetic curation a slightly exaggerated version of now? The term *aesthetic,* Greek in origin, entered the English language in the 1700s as philosophers grappled with how humans evaluate both beauty and art. As the field of psychology evolved, its tenets and the philosophical principles of aesthetics increasingly intertwined. When scientific understanding of the brain advanced—as when imaging technology allowed neuroscientists to observe brain activity—psychology and aesthetics were roiled. Suddenly, every human emotion had the potential to be triggered, mapped and recorded as data.

In 1999, neuroscientist Semir Zeki coined the term *neuroaesthetics*, launching a new field of inquiry into the connections between science and art. In the information age, the study of neuroaesthetics has boomed as academics apply what we know about the brain to centuries-old questions about how humans process beauty. Normally, the birth of a new academic discipline is cause for celebration—but some question the legitimacy of this nascent field.

"To suggest that the human brain responds in a particular way to art risks creating criteria of right or wrong," wrote Philip Ball, a celebrated science journalist and longtime *Nature* editor, in 2013. Another critique comes from philosopher Alva Noë, who argued in a 2011 *New York Times* op-ed, "Neuroscience, which looks at events in the brains of individual people and can do no more than describe and analyze them, may just be the wrong kind of empirical science for understanding art."

As the forefather of neuroaesthetics, Zeki hit back: "You will never have a complete theory of aesthetics unless you take account of the organ through which you have the aesthetic experience."

Let's take a step back and review the organ in question. We know that "our brains do not have a dedicated aesthetic or art module," says neuroscientist Anjan Chatterjee, director of the Penn Center for Neuroaesthetics as well as ChatLab, which sets out to "explore beauty, language, cognition and the brain." Rather, any aesthetic experience we have relies on a range of information collected by multiple senses.

A model developed by Chatterjee posits that the way we experience aesthetics is three-pronged: sensory, emotional and cognitive. When we see an object, the image of that object travels from our eyes to our brain's occipital lobes. This is the sensory response. Our emotional response occurs in the limbic areas of the brain, where the pleasure or reward centers are located. The cognitive response occurs partly in our temporal lobe as we contextualize the object within our stores of memory and knowledge. Education, culture and language all have an impact on the way we perceive and evaluate any one object. These parts of the brain are some of the same structures that regulate our enjoyment of food and sex. And yet evolutionary

Left: Milan Design Week has become a gathering of companies that use neuroaesthetics to create immersive brand experiences, such as the Lexus installation *Leading With Light,* produced with design firm Rhizomatiks.

theory can't fully explain what we deem beautiful or why.

That brings us to what we *don't* know about the brain. "The principles of mapping elemental and visual properties such as shape, color, movement and location onto their emotional tones have yet to be worked out," Chatterjee writes in his book *The Aesthetic Brain*. Despite the ability of brain imaging to peer inside our heads and assign data points to our brain's chemistry, "any kind of neuro-imaging study is very simplistic, really taking only one kind of task and acquiring some images of brain activity," says Martin Skov, a researcher with the Danish Research Centre for Magnetic Resonance. "The depressing way that neuroscience works is that you can form a picture of what happens only if you have a lot of studies you can pull together." In other words, neuroscience isn't capable of perceiving the subjective meanings (or the universal meaning) in individual objects or works of art.

And yet, many neuroscientists like to say that beauty isn't in the eye of the beholder; it's in the brain. If you talk to them long enough, however, they'll revise that statement. Indeed, every aesthetic experience we have is perceived with our entire body. "Your brain is not really for understanding art. The brain is for regulating metabolism and things that keep you alive," Skov says.

In addition to the sensory, emotional and cognitive responses happening inside the brain, the current state of the body is also crucial. Is the body cold? Is it hungry? This information doesn't show up on an fMRI.

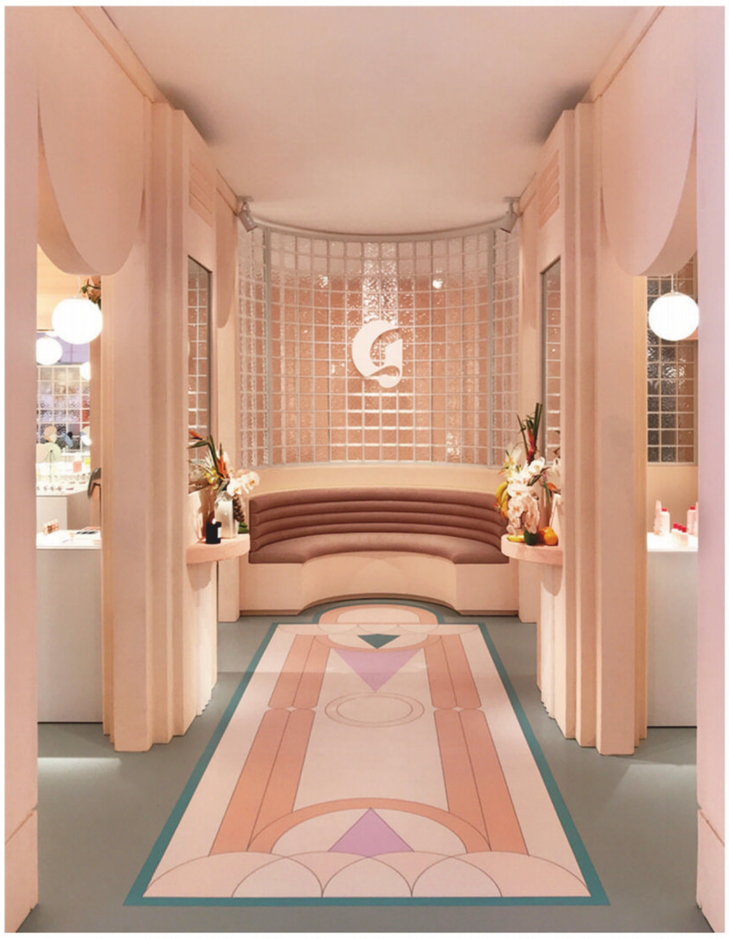
"When you talk with people outside neuroscience, they can get quite annoyed that this is the criticism at the moment," says Skov. A designer recently approached him, wanting to know what color to paint hospital rooms to ease patient recovery. As Skov relayed to the designer, "It's not possible to predict on an individual basis how the individual person will respond to the same stimulus." It isn't sexy, but that's the scientific reality.

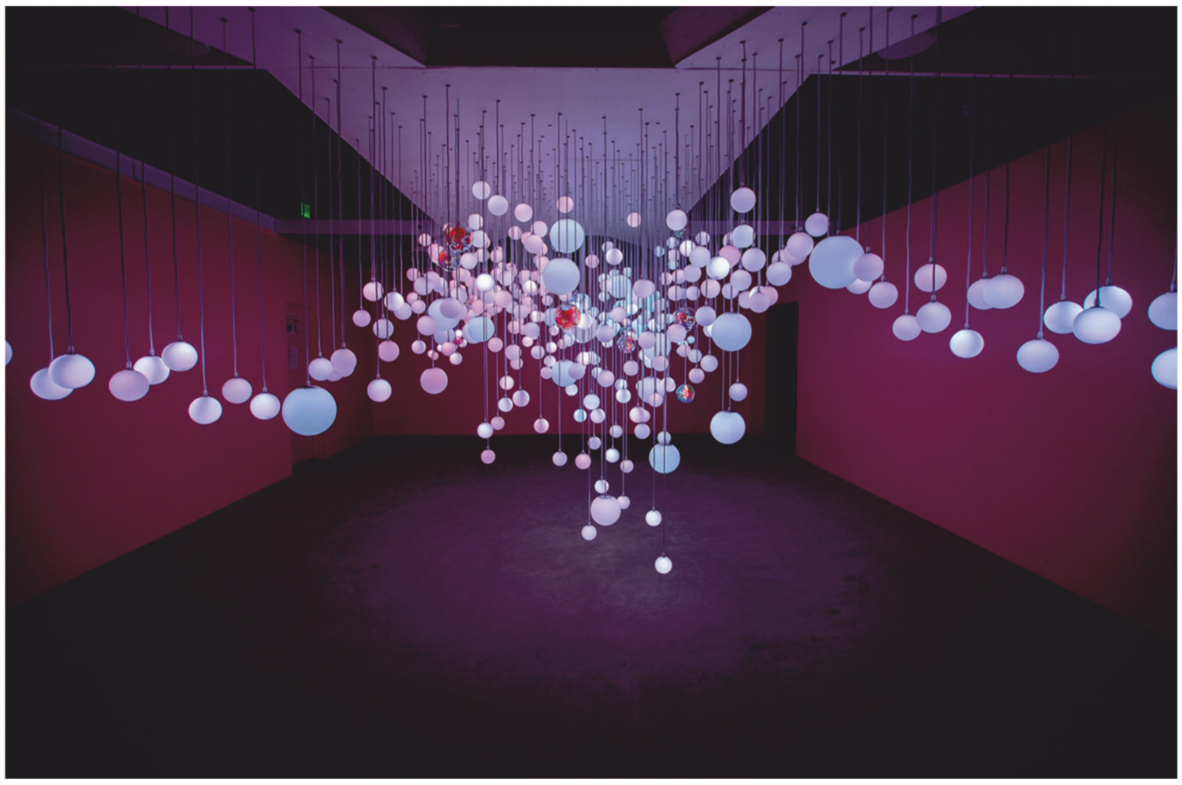
That doesn't mean we'll never be able to predict which environments the human brain prefers. "Studies indicate that aesthetic qualities of architecture have an impact on our mood, cognitive functioning, behavior and even mental health," states "Buildings, Beauty, and the Brain: A Neuroscience of Architectural Experience," a 2017 white paper co-authored by Chatterjee. A 2015 study found that open rooms and rooms with higher ceilings are more likely to be judged as beautiful. A different study suggests that curvilinear spaces encourage cooperation among people. Another one investigated the ability of some buildings to induce a meditative or contemplative effect. These studies are based on subjects viewing 2D images. Neuroscientists suggest that the study of 3D spaces will require even more refined scientific methods to filter out irrelevant factors.

You might think neuroaesthetics would avoid the tendency of new sciences to breach the popular culture as fact, but it's already happening. You may have heard that potted plants make apartment residents happier. This is part of the "biophilia hypothesis," and it's just that—a hypothesis. A 2011 paper co-authored by Chatterjee discusses "the hold that neuroscience has on the public imagination." Much as the wellness industry now slaps such buzzwords as *green, organic* and *sustainable* on products, marketers have taken the prefix *neuro* and run with it. Think of the Neuro line of energy drinks (one flavor, Bliss, promises its "neural-focused nutrients" will reduce stress) or software programs for patients with dementia. "Brain-fitness programs are examples of products designed with plausible scientific rationales," the paper states. "However, in these cases, commerce has moved ahead of the science. The marketing of these products often exaggerates or misrepresents the science motivating their production."

It's not only marketers who are gathering inspiration from the burgeoning field of neuroaesthetics; members of the traditional humanities have also played with its underlying principles. Ani Liu is an "experimental artist" and winner of this year's Princeton Arts Fellowship. Her work "examines the reciprocal relationships between science, technology and their influence on human subjectivity, culture and identity." This includes projects such as *Affective Induction Spa: Experiments in Programmed Emotions,* in which an art collective from the Massachusetts

Right: In March, online beauty brand Glossier opened a pop-up retail experience in Miami inspired by the city's Art Deco Historic District and featuring a mural by artist and mental health advocate Jacquie Comrie.





Above: The Museum of Dream Space, which bills itself as the "first digital art museum," opened in Los Angeles this year. Inspired by Yayoi Kusama's *Infinity Mirror Rooms,* it's an example of experiential art merged with commerce.

> "I don't think we can predict that people will use this kind of information in a completely ethical way."

Institute of Technology "used findings from science to induce emotional experiences of pleasure and happiness" in visitors at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. Some were given a bone-conduction sound massage, while others were tickled with feathers by students in lab coats.

Liu is open about the purely representative nature of this "experiment"; it's primarily meant to spur conversation about the possibilities of the field. "I think the placebo effect in and of itself was the most informative one. As soon as you sit down and we tell you this is scientific-induced happiness, you're already in a really happy mood," she says.

By comparison, Booker Prize–winning novelist A.S. Byatt was criticized for a 2006 piece in *The Times Literary Supplement* detailing her neuro-reading of John Donne's poetry. Chris Power, a literary critic at *The Guardian,* disparaged Byatt's theory that "Donne's poems are so easy to memorize because of his unusual way with syntax," which appeals to readers on a neural level. This "seems like the next ride in cultural theory's funfair of scientific misappropriation," Power wrote. Philosopher, poet and cultural critic Raymond Tallis was more blunt: "I find it impossible to make neuroscientific sense of this."

At the 2019 Milan Furniture Fair, Google and architect Suchi Reddy created an installation that examined visitors' experiences of built environments. According to a report in *Fast Company,* visitors wore bands with sensors that measured their biological responses to various room designs. Using an algorithm developed with Johns Hopkins University's Arts + Mind Lab ("a research-to-practice initiative for accelerating the field of neuroaesthetics") to graphically render biometric data such as heart rate and skin temperature, the creators were able to present participants with colorful postcards indicating which parts of the structure they found most appealing. But the technology around this is no more precise than photographs purporting to capture your aura.

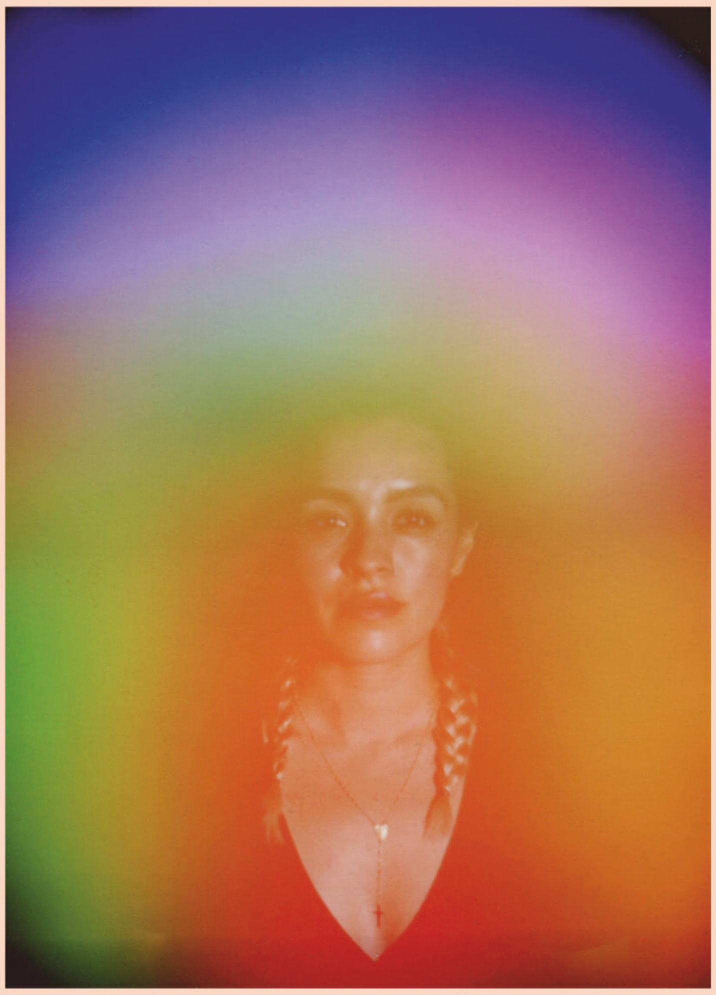
Google's interest in neuroaesthetics raises ethical questions about the field's future applications being wielded by technology giants that traffic in data. The concerns are rooted in the rise of brain branding, or the use of neuroscience and neuroscientific data to design and sell products—a sort of commercialized hacking of the brain.

"I don't even like the word *neuroaesthetics*; I prefer the phrase *cognitive neuroscience of aesthetics,* because it has turned into this brand for just selling stuff that seems to be scientific but is really pseudoscientific," says psychologist Marcos Nadal. "It's generally used to give a scientific gloss to any statement that anybody cares to mention about nature, design, buildings or art."

Of note, there are now "neuroaesthetics consultants." I ask Nadal about the handouts from the installation in Milan. "I think it's as harmful or harmless as giving people flawed psychological reports on their personality," he says, or giving Myers-Briggs Type Indicator personality tests to MBA students, which more psychologists have of late declared useless.

In 2008, a company called Mindlab International tracked customers' brain activity as they shopped at a T.J. Maxx store. According to *Business of Fashion,* the company found "significant increase in brain activity" when discounted designer labels were discovered among nonluxury brands. "Armed with this information, T.J. Maxx could design its store layout to maximise this 'treasure hunt' effect and attempt to trigger more moments of positive, purchase-inducing feelings," the article concludes. A design-research collaboration called Acclair Art Valuation Service proposes to upend the art market by assigning a "neuro-value" to artwork as determined by a viewer's brain response.

Above: Bulgari partnered with Argentinian artist Tomás Saraceno for this Milan Design Week installation. Channeling neuroaesthetics, the piece explores "the connection between design, science and art."



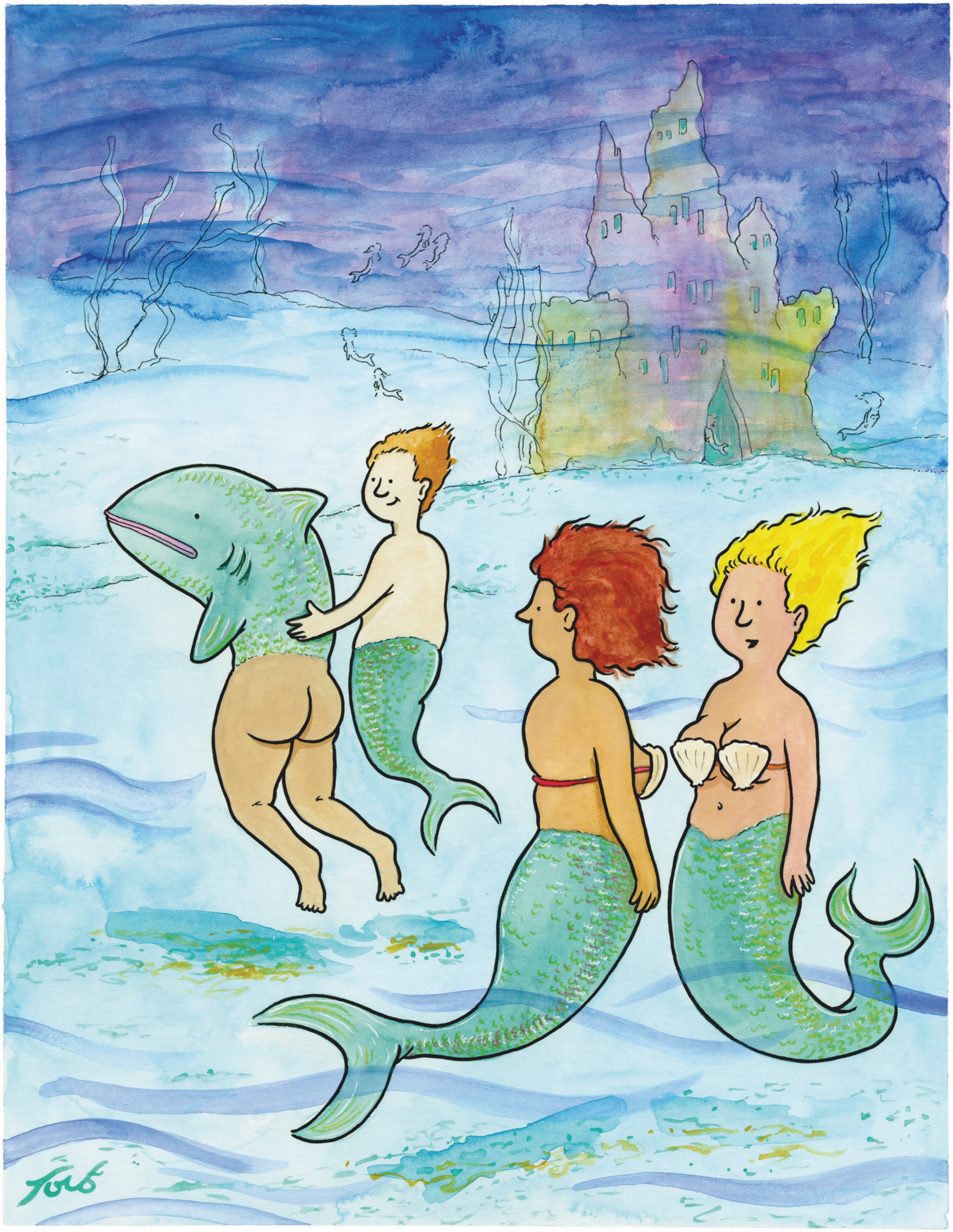
Left: Aura photography, also known as Kirlian photography, can be traced to the 1930s but has become mainstream in the Instagram era. This photo is provided by Auradome, which "offers explorations of energy and color."

It's not hard to foresee a scenario in which simply the promise of neuroaesthetic insight will be enough to get customers through the door. Companies can mine customers' data while simultaneously marketing to them. The transition from baiting consumers with Insta-genic environments to running actual lab studies is so seamless as to be unnoticed by most people. We're already primed to partake in these schemes as companies woo visitors to colorful pop-up "museums" or meditation retreats where every experience is sponsored by a wellness brand. Some already collect data—at Color Factory, visitors receive a QR-coded card that tracks the selfies they take in the environment—but they're brands with a limited marketing agenda. Unlike Google, they don't already hold the keys to our online identities. I asked each of the academics I interviewed this question: What would happen if companies used the allure of neuroaesthetics to learn more about customers than customers knew themselves?

"To my knowledge, nobody [in academia] is asking that," Chatterjee says.

Adds Skov, "I don't think we can predict that people will use this kind of information in a wholly, completely ethically sound way."

You wake up in an apartment that has been expertly curated by an intelligent personal assistant. Everything from the artwork on the walls to the cutlery in the kitchen has been selected by companies based on what they think your brain perceives to be most beautiful. You've been sold a life of pleasure. Are you happy? ■



"He's an ass man."

DESERT SOLITAIRE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
JENNIFER STENGLEIN

DECEMBER PLAYMATE

For December Playmate **Jordy Murray,** a New Jersey native who's bringing new life to the arid West, liberation is life, vulnerability is strength and pleasure is never guilty

I find the most pleasure when I am unapologetically myself. To be liberated by the feeling that I'm most myself at any moment, even if it requires me to be my most vulnerable, feels fucking amazing. Having the strength to express your wants and needs without the urge to downplay them, you develop an immunity to the judgments and obsessions that hold you back.

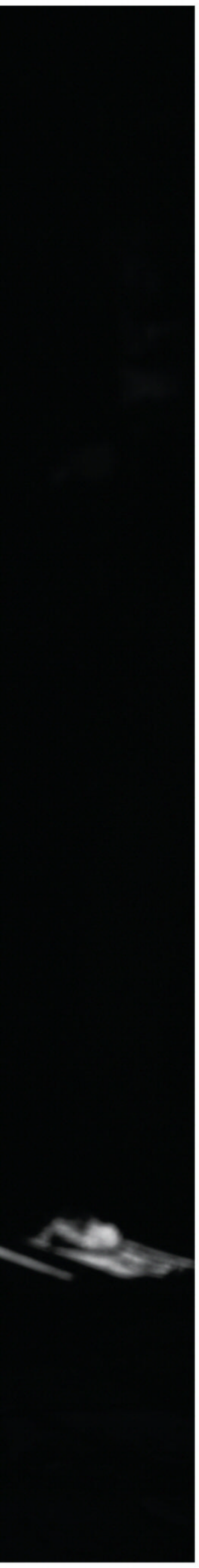
My whole career has been a river of winding experiences, and I honestly didn't think I would find so much joy in pursuing this path. I've always been a bit restless and mercurial—my family moved seven times before I turned 16. (My grandma says we get itchy feet.) I was born in New Jersey, and we lived in Pennsylvania, Georgia, Michigan, Wisconsin and California before I graduated from high school early and went to live with a family in Sydney, Australia. After I'd grown up in so many places in rural and suburban America, Sydney felt special and dynamic. I ended up going to college there and got scouted by a modeling agency on campus when I was 17. It wasn't long before I dropped out of school and moved to New York during Fashion Week.

I don't know if you've ever set foot inside a modeling apartment, but it's basically purgatory. The only thing in the cupboards was a tub of Mucinex and in the fridge a six-pack of Diet Coke. I think I cried every day for six weeks, certain I'd made the biggest mistake of my life. The city was freezing and covered in gray slush. I hated it so much. But after about a year, I got acclimated: I started working in a café, the modeling jobs started trickling in, and I got out of that bunk-bed situation.

I quickly grew to love the freedom my job allows me. As consumer-driven as the industry may be, I love the idea that you get to co-create and fulfill a vision with other people. To play the role of muse or participate in an artwork with meaning—I live and die for those days. That's why I was so excited about working with PLAYBOY: The ability to have a say in the creative brief is such a rare privilege. It really is an honor.

My favorite thing about PLAYBOY, and also the scary thing about it, is that everybody has their own personal relationship with the brand. Like cilantro or the word *moist,* it elicits strong reactions. My friends and family were all super supportive of my decision—not that they had a choice; I've been running around naked since the age of five. If female nudity offends some people, that's fine. If others think female nudity undermines the ideal of feminism, that's also fine. I don't agree with either of those sentiments, and I'm so proud of what we created for this issue.

Pleasure is not a luxury; I wish I'd told myself that when I was younger. It's not a reward for working hard. It's not an inherently guilty experience. Pleasure is absolutely a priority for a healthy life.



Pleasure
is absolutely
a priority
for a
healthy life.

DATA SHEET

BIRTHPLACE: Voorhees, New Jersey **CURRENT CITY:** Los Angeles, California

ON GUILTY PLEASURES

Why does pleasure have to be guilty? In sex education, only boys are encouraged to self-explore; girls don't learn till much later how to locate and advocate for their own pleasure. We should teach kids that pleasure is absolutely essential to their well-being. I would love to be a sex-education teacher—someone who goes to schools and reframes the subject for kids. I want to talk about consent and pleasure and bring these things into age-appropriate conversations, because sex ed is such a joke at the moment.

ON IMPOSTOR SYNDROME

One thing I wish I could give up: self-doubt. It's terrible. I've never been on set and *not* thought that I was going to get sent home. Not once. Every single job I've ever been on, I've felt that if I make it to lunchtime, I can relax—"Ah, they're not going to send me home now; it would be too expensive."

ON ROLE REVERSALS

As much as it might be nice to take a break from the industry, it would be amazing to work on the other side of the camera. I take film photos—bad photos of beautiful friends of mine.

ON CREATIVE CHEMISTRY

I was able to choose my photographer, Jennifer Stenglein. We met on a shoot in Bali, and I was immediately in love with her. I can't tell if I want her to be my mom, my girlfriend or my best friend. She's so in love with women, and it shows in her photographs.

ON FOOD RULES

I'm a vegan, and I haven't eaten meat since I was eight. I really care about the environment and animals, but I don't like the idea of evangelizing about ways of eating. We're all trying our very hardest with the information we have, but I think you can eat from every food group and be conscientious of the time and effort it took for that food to get to you. My decision to be a vegan doesn't make anybody else's choice inadequate or less moral.

ON FLYING

I cry on airplanes. Always. There's something about it—the idea that you're leaving somewhere, looking out the window for hours. I'm a window person, but I have to pee all the time, so everyone hates me.

ON PET PEEVES

Picky eaters. Oh my God, if you're an adult and I find out you're afraid to try new foods, I'll just have no respect for you anymore.

ON HIDDEN TALENTS

I can juggle anything that's round and smaller than a bowling ball.

Jordan Murray

PLAYBOY'S
party jokes

PEOPLE talk about sex in 2019 the way they used to talk about having a baby: "The gender doesn't matter to me, as long as it's healthy."—*Bri Pruett*

MUTUAL masturbation is like paying a handyman to assemble an Ikea bed instead of putting it together yourself. Either way, you're going to take a nap afterward, but you'll have a better time if someone does it for you.—*Adam Levin*

A girl once told me she wanted to experiment in bed, so I poured a bunch of baking soda and vinegar into her belly button and yelled "*Behold the majesty of Krakatoa!*" Anyway, we're married now.—*Ian Karmel*

YOU can tell a man is about to end things when he starts listing all your good qualities in a really sad voice. "You're smart. You're successful. You're funny." Oh no. And you're dumping me!—*Marcia Belsky*

A man asked his reclusive brother what he'd been up to.

"I joined one of those multilevel marketing schemes," the brother replied.

"Huh," the man said skeptically. "Looking to make a little money on the side?"

"No, I'm looking for people to stop inviting me to stuff or contacting me for any reason."—*Joseph Scialabba*

A girl once told me she wanted to role-play in bed, so I threw 20-sided dice as a saving roll against a cacodemon's fire attack. Anyway, we're married now.—*I.K.*

I'M not sure if anybody knows this, but female dogs refer to doggy style as "the only thing my boring husband ever wants to do."—*Amy Silverberg*

LIFEHACK: If you stand outside a nice restaurant wearing a red jacket, people will literally give you the keys to their car.—*J.S.*

WE'VE all seen the articles asking why millennials are having less sex than baby boomers. Well, you'd have less sex too if you could masturbate to anime porn while ordering Chipotle.—*Andy Haynes*

IF you're not five minutes early, you're five minutes late. Unless you text "OMW" and just show up whenever.—*B.P.*

IT'S scary how happy the SKIP INTRO button makes us. We're all so horned up for TV that even Netflix is like, "You wanna ditch this foreplay bullshit?" and we're like, "PUT IT IN!"—J.S.

LOOK on the bright side: Once you lose your virginity, technically your entire life is postcoital.—*Robert Buscemi*

I used to have sex with straight men like it was going out of style. Little did I know, it absolutely was.—*B.P.*

OUR Unabashed Dictionary has been enhanced with four more variations on the term *sexting*....
$exting = Sexy texting with a prostitute.
Saxting = Sexy texting with the ghost of Clarence Clemons.
Steve Saxting = Sexy texting with lifetime .281 hitter Steve Sax.
Flaxting = Sexy texting with a burlap sack of ancient grain.—*I.K.*

A girl once told me she wanted to bring another man into bed, so we invited the beloved actor known for his starring roles in *Groundhog Day, Lost in Translation* and *Caddyshack* to sleep with us. Anyway, we're Murrayed now.—*I.K.*

THE PLAYBOY

SYM
POS
IUM

Pleasure, despite its infinite sources, is pleasure only once it passes through our senses. We asked five heavyweights, from an A-list director to an orgasm curator, to pick a sense and run with it; the following essays might just change the way you see, hear, smell, taste and touch the world

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **MAURIZIO DI IORIO**

Chlorine and Brunettes

BY **COLMAN ANDREWS**

The eight-time James Beard Award winner and co-founder of *Saveur* magazine muses on the gateway to memory

It is the oldest of the senses and arguably the most useful. Even the single-cell organisms that preceded us by eons possessed a form of smell and used it to appraise their environment. More immediately and vividly even than vision—which has become the predominant human sense—smell can alert us to danger, invigorate or calm us, seduce us sexually or stimulate our appetites.

Smell is also the most treacherous of the senses. It can sneak up on us and stick a dagger in our hearts. A few stray molecules of perfume drifting through the air—invisible, unexpected—can turn our lives upside down in an instant. Suddenly, heartbreakingly, it's as if you're there with her again, drawn by her scent into an aching reminiscence of everything attached to it. Her voice, her eyes, her skin.

Smell affects us this way because it's more intimately and strongly linked to memory and emotion than the other senses, and because scent memory persists long after its visual and auditory counterparts have begun to fade. Vision, hearing, touch and taste get to us indirectly. They transmit information to the cerebral cortex, the part of the brain that gives meaning to our sensory input, by way of the thalamus, a kind of relay station that passes stimuli along to the appropriate corner of the cranium.

The nose, on the other hand, is hardwired—hot-wired—straight into the forebrain. Odors are picked up by receptor cells in the nostrils and from there speed without detour to an organ called the olfactory bulb. This connects directly to the limbic system, which regulates much of what we remember and how we feel. New research suggests that the bulb itself might even store memories, making the connection even faster and more intimate. No wonder a waft of perfume can teleport us so instantly and tauntingly.

I'm not sure how old I was when I first started paying attention to the way things smell. As a kid, I took my senses for granted, as most of us probably do. They were just there. In the case of smell, I figured out early on that some aromas pleased me (burgers on the grill, fresh-mown grass, wood smoke), others didn't (sweaty gym socks, garlic breath, rotten eggs), and I thought no more about it.

Gradually, as I accumulated life experience, I started noticing the scent of things more consciously and associating aromas with memories. One night early in my romantic career I had a kind of olfactory epiphany, realizing how capricious scent memory could be. I had gone to bed with a tall, soft brunette at her West Hollywood apartment, where I found the intense odor of chlorine bleach on her just-washed sheets almost too distracting. I was suddenly back in the swimming pools of my childhood, splashing in the sun, far too young for romance. (When the sense of touch took over, that memory happily receded and my olfactory system stored better memories instead.)

I think my olfactory life began to bloom in earnest when I was in my mid-20s and starting to learn about wine. Wine tasting, I quickly figured out, is mostly wine smelling. Literal tasting is important to detect things like acidity, tannins and viscosity, but everything else comes through the olfactory bulb, even (or especially) the wine's actual flavor. What wine lovers call "nose," or the way wine smells in the glass, depends on thousands of sense references, most of which we don't even know we have. Scientists believe the human nose is capable of detecting at least 1 trillion different odors.

These are what make malbec taste different from pinot noir and German riesling different from its California counterpart, and a lot of what disposes us to like good wine better than bad.

Describing the aromas of wine is difficult, however, and wine writers tend to get a little wacky in their attempts. Wines, if you believe the critics, smell like black cherry, red cherry, dried cherry, lemon peel, gingerbread, smoke, tobacco, creosote, coffee, leather, spring flowers, autumn leaves, damp stone, cat pee, manure. Some of these descriptors are nonsensical. I recently saw "salted nuts" evoked to describe the nose of a chardonnay; sorry, but you can't smell salt.

Others make perfect sense. Wine aged in new oak barrels, for instance, often smells like vanilla because both vanilla and oak contain a phenolic aldehyde called vanillin. There's a hint of geraniums in muscat because both the muscat grape and geranium leaves contain an aromatic compound called geraniol.

I tend to cut wine writers some slack, in any case, because an interesting thing about smell is that it doesn't have much of a vocabulary of its own. We have unequivocal ways of describing what we see (blue, square, hazy), hear (soft, discordant, high-pitched), feel (firm, hot, bumpy) and taste (salty, sour, sweet). Most of our descriptors for aroma, though, are metaphorical: That smells skunky, grassy, fresh; like apples, pine needles, gasoline.

We each develop our own associations, of course. Skunky to me might be buttery to you. Where I find apples, you might find pears. The perfume that reminds me of a lost love could summon a crazy aunt or nasty boss in your mind. The garlicky aromas drifting out the back door of the Thai restaurant down the street might make you queasy while they just make me want to dig into a bowl of *khao soi*. And the pungent smell of chlorine bleach, quite reasonably, makes many people gag. But it sometimes still reminds me of swimming pools, and brunettes. ■

Bring On the Vomit

BY **PAUL FEIG**

The lauded comedic director (*Bridesmaids, Ghostbusters,* the upcoming *Last Christmas*) on the joys of making you laugh without depending on dialogue

When I was in film school back in the 1980s, the goal was to tell a story visually. That's why the old silent films are so interesting—even though some have dialogue cards, the best don't have very many. Movies started as an exclusively visual medium. With the advent of sound, you were able to explain more things through dialogue, and people got used to witty banter and clever exchanges. Sometimes, we as writers fall back on that as a crutch. For me, the great challenge is to tell something visually.

Part of the emphasis on verbal storytelling comes from the process of script writing. The joke is that when studio executives read a script, they read just the dialogue—they skip over all the action and description. I don't know if that's true, but there are times when you feel that way. You'll write something out visually—the way something happens to a character, or what they're observing and how they're processing it—and then you'll get notes that the audience isn't going to understand *this* and *this*. Generally, when you're addressing notes, you're writing dialogue to explain everything.

As filmmakers, we write all this exposition to shore something up, but the minute two actors get together, so much is spoken visually, through their facial expressions, the positioning of their bodies, the way they're interacting spatially with each other. You assume you have to explain *this* and *this*, but then two charismatic actors appear on-screen and the minute they see each other, the audience goes, "They're gonna fall in love."

For the sex scene between Kristen Wiig and Jon Hamm that begins *Bridesmaids,* we choreographed it like a dance and a fight at the same time. That's what made us laugh: Let's start this movie by just blasting it out of the gate with a woman who's in a really bad relationship. You watch it and immediately think, My God, this poor thing. (Of course, if you watch my more recent film, *A Simple Favor,* you'll realize I do the exact same thing every time I shoot a sex scene: It always starts in a wide shot, and as they hit the bed, I slowly push in and land on somebody's face. And that's about it.)

When Melissa McCarthy does her first kill in *Spy,* she gets in a fight with this guy who falls off a ledge and has a horrible death. She sees it and throws up on him, then drops the knife on him. That's a very big visual, physical gag; as an audience member, you instantly go, "If I killed somebody, I would probably throw up." It's about finding what is visually attached to the story you're telling.

I shot my new movie, *Last Christmas,* entirely in central London. Even though it's a fairly verbal story of two people falling in love, it's important that the visuals augment it to make you feel like you're there. So that's another level of visuals: providing a beautiful backdrop for the verbal.

It can be the hardest thing in the world for a director to figure out which movie to do next. But making films with female leads is all I've ever wanted to do. I really relate to women, and female characters have been portrayed so poorly on the screen for so long. I know so many funny, talented women, and a lot of female audience members weren't seeing themselves in certain roles because of the language of movies and Hollywood's patriarchal view of the world. The men were the heroes, and the women were the ones at home. And that's not aspirational at all. Who watches that and goes, "Cool, I can't wait to be one of these nagging wives who tell the hero he's got to have dinner with the family instead of going out and stopping that nuclear bomb from blowing up the city"? Everybody wants to be the hero. The women in my life are all very heroic.

I was really drawn to doing *Ghostbusters* because the idea of the original movie is so great: funny, smart people trying to defeat the supernatural with technology. It's so rich for more exploration. I told the studio, "You can't make this small." It has to be big and visual, which is why we did it in 3-D and came up with new tricks, like shooting the proton stream through the IMAX screen's black bars. Honestly, my favorite way to watch our movie is in IMAX, because it's such a different—and completely visual—experience.

What I love about what I do is we have to get it right only once. A lot of times we go in not knowing if we can get it right, and then there's that lightning-in-a-bottle moment when two actors connect, or some stunt goes a way you didn't think it would, or a train goes through the background of your shot right when you didn't expect it. That's what's so wonderful about the visual: You lock in time every single element you wanted to control or wanted to create or were lucky enough to find. It's these moments that bring that visual energy to an audience, and they get to watch it for hundreds of years after. ■

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Taste Takes Time

BY **MARINA TWEED**

The Gourmand founder and editor in chief wants us to slow down and cultivate a discerning palate

Be it food or information, the more substance we (thoughtfully) consume, the more we gain. Our personal likes and dislikes are what make us interesting, and we can develop these preferences only through experience. So how, in a world of instant gratification, do we keep our sense of taste both individual and refined?

Everybody eats, but food is about so much more than just eating. My partner and I founded *The Gourmand* as a means to talk not just about food but about the culture that surrounds it. To tell the stories of people who are inspired by eating and drinking—whether they're artists or writers, filmmakers or chefs, designers or musicians—we talk to them about their inspirations, aspirations and experiences. The journal is also a place for us to collaborate with photographers, set designers and illustrators to produce photo essays, still-life features and documentary imagery, all inspired by the endlessly creative field of food. As editors, we see the magazine as a culmination of our personal interests and ideas, and its pages as a testament to food's communicative power. Essentially, *The Gourmand* is about taste—in every sense of the word.

The predominant purpose of taste is to keep us alive, to prevent us from eating poison. It's essential to our evolution, designed to entice us to eat a varied diet and stay in good health. And of course it provides the utter pleasure of eating.

We also use the word *taste* to describe our leanings in music, art, fashion, film or anything else with which we surround our physical or psychological selves. And the same word has been adopted to describe an experience—a taste of something new. On all counts, taste is one of the key ingredients that make us who we are.

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Taste buds are composed of some 50 to 100 taste-receptor cells bundled together on the tongue and epiglottis (the protective flap in the throat). These receptors are responsible for the detection of various tastes, commonly distinguished as sweet, salty, bitter, sour and umami. But it's the gustatory cortex in our brain that processes taste, and it is this part of the brain we can teach *how* to taste. By feeding it with information, chefs, sommeliers, food analysts—anyone—can expand their sensory knowledge of flavor.

Taste takes time to develop, and it all starts in the womb. A fetus develops taste buds that can detect strong flavors through the amniotic fluid from as early as 13 weeks in utero. Once a baby is born, flavors can be passed on through the mother's breast milk. As the milk changes according to the mother's diet, the baby's library of flavors broadens.

Exposure to flavors at an early age contributes to the tolerance of certain foods. I was very aware of this while weaning my firstborn, and now at the age of four he enjoys eating spicy food as much as he does beans on toast. Flavor exposure enables children to accept foods within their culture—and explains why they may have an aversion toward other flavors.

Our taste in food is not something we're born with; it can be learned and refined over time, and the same is true of our cultural tastes. Fetuses can hear from as early as 18 weeks, and taking in sounds at such an early age helps familiarize them with the world they're about to enter. As with our taste in food, our taste in music is something we have to find: We can learn what we like or don't like only through discovery.

This journey of discovery is infinite. Throughout our lives our tastes can evolve as we're exposed to economic, ethical and environmental factors. I for one float between being a "free-form" carnivore to a fish-eating vegan depending on where I am in the world, what my body craves and what I've recently read or watched. And some things we can just outgrow (though I can't imagine I'll ever stop loving vanilla ice cream).

Our tastes are realized through knowledge and experience. Be it food, music, art or wine, we get the most out of the things we put the most into. It's key to our development that we allow ourselves the time to discover, experiment, play and digest. But in this age—when we can shop a pop star's look while Alexa queues up that same artist's latest album, or google the latest superfood as our fridge orders groceries, or Instagram the art others have "curated" for us while an algorithm selects films to watch on Netflix—time is hard to come by. Are we missing out on the exploration of our personal likes and dislikes, the adventure of discovering them and the pleasure of consuming them? Through social media and the amplification—as opposed to cultivation—of our own tastes, are we in fact not learning enough about ourselves?

Perhaps we should avoid being told what's in good taste, stop following the tastemakers and take the time to discover things for ourselves. After all, home-cooked food always tastes much better than ready-made. ■

I See What I Hear

BY **SACHA JENKINS**

From the Emmy-nominated creator of Showtime's *Wu-Tang Clan: Of Mics and Men,* a love letter to the songs and sounds that made him dream—and live

Music is cinematic. When this scribe listens to music, I see things that don't exist. Yet. Melody has the ability to score the scoreless. It has the ability either to combine imagination with desire to create something brand new or to pump to the surface feelings that have been bubbling deep below the recesses of the flesh.

It all boils down to the endless possibilities that sound offers us. Maybe we learned from nature, because nature is an accomplished musician. Sea breezes, bird chirps, cricket shrieks, a fallen tree that no human was around to hear make its last splash, a volcano popping off—I'm talking about the original bangin' beats right there. Somebody famously said that the hills are alive with the sound of music. Said individual wasn't bullshitting.

In nature, the duty of sound is to represent the life force of the immediate environment. This is why hip-hop is so appealing: The sound and culture are a reflection of and a reaction to their immediate surroundings. When you listen to Public Enemy's *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back,* you hear sirens and air-raid alarms booming behind Chuck D's growl, the way you would hear Sitting Bull's wail accompanied by hawks and stampeding bison on the Lakota plains. The Bomb Squad—the chief architects of that classic PE sound—was referencing the chaos of everyday inner-city life in their fearless narratives. Most bomb squads deactivate bombs; Hank and Keith Shocklee and Eric "Vietnam" Sadler dropped them on our heads.

For years, I was a music journalist. I had the great fortune of spending time with the Gs of the era I represent: Nas, 50 Cent, Eminem, Roxanne Shanté. Their childhood experiences had a heavy hand in the music they would make. The chaos and trauma they faced as shorties would be documented in their lyrics and supported and amplified by producer greats like DJ Premier, Dr. Dre, Marley Marl and Pete Rock—men who also knew the maddening sounds of the hood all too well. Still, they were masters who reimagined ugliness and pain, trumpeters who honored the beauty in the struggle and the triumph that awaits after the last bar and beat fade.

As a director of films, I can assure you that there's a music video of my own playing in my mind for every song I love, even if a video already exists for it. When I watch TV, I don't see images or have visions of objects or people other than the ones I see flashing before me. Television is literal. Linear. Binary. Which is fine if you want to stay inside the places these programs can take you.

But sound has an algebraic quality, shrouded and mysterious (at least to me) yet definitive. Important. Nurturing and warm. Necessary and essential. The sounds that vibrate here on earth? There is an abundance. Hip-hop has mastered the idea and manifestation of the so-called sound collage, pointing country music in the direction of disco, in the direction of jazz, in the direction of zydeco and so on. For many of us coming up around the way, the infinite textures of hip-hop music nurtured us and took us to places our parents couldn't afford to. In hip-hop we heard Africa, the place our public schools often characterized as "uncivilized." We heard the sounds of Africa in our "black" American music, which helped us better understand who we are. Maybe I hadn't physically been to Africa at that point, but by my teens, I damn sure knew what it sounded like.

When you take the time to count all the distinct sounds and styles that hip-hop has touched, you realize that the keepers of the culture are actually mad scientists, melding together strands of DNA often kept separated by the nightmare that has soiled the American dream for those of us who are a tad bit darker than baby blue.

As for those music videos in my mind, my American dream goes like this: Whenever I hear that Smashing Pumpkins joint "Cherub Rock" off *Siamese Dream,* I see teenage black girls rockin' those percussive cheerleader steps and chants (there's Africa!) in sync with Jimmy Chamberlin's rattlesnake-y little-drummer-boy snare runs (Africa again!). To me, my vision is akin to what happens when your chocolate winds up in someone else's peanut butter: delicious.

Another great song: Kool G Rap's "Take 'Em to War" (also featuring B-1 and MF Grimm). It's ominous, haunting and sneaky in the way the bass lick is massaged into your cranium. Then Grimm's words seep in: "Fuck what you heard, crime pays / And always, unorthodox, I hold my pistol sideways / We kill crews, hearts go numb / And if retaliation comes then yo, fuck it, it just comes."

With this I see a gaggle of disgruntled employees hovering around a water cooler, scheming how to physically remove their CEO. Suits and ties suddenly taking the law into their own hands—which is essentially what Kool G and crew are doing inside the song. When someone interjects, "Fuck Pataki," they're railing against then governor of New York George Pataki's long-ass arm of the law. G Rap and company weren't donning suits, though—strictly ski masks and leather gloves.

This is what I see because life often apes art, and the sounds we hear are married to the moments we experience in real time. Shit is wilder than the jungle. ■

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Touch Is More Than Touch

BY **EMMA KOENIG**

Your skin has a mind of its own, and other musings from the writer behind *Moan: Anonymous Essays on Female Orgasm*

Years ago, I had an uncomfortable sexual experience. As much as I wanted to surrender to bliss, nothing felt good, and the other person did not pick up on my nonverbal signals: my tense body, my blank face, my silence. He assumed my experience was a positive one.

Most of us think we're smart enough, poised enough and experienced enough to do the "right" thing in scenarios like this. We think we'll be able to identify why we're uncomfortable and voice our concerns in a strong yet sensitive, yet *casual* tone. But in that moment, I couldn't speak up. It wasn't until later that I could name the cause: I'd wanted to be polite. Overwhelmed by the physical sensation, I had unconsciously prioritized his experience over mine. (Apparently he and I had that in common.)

As I started to examine all the things that had led up to this moment of self-imposed silence, I was struck by a need to immerse myself in the sexual experiences of others. I spent years collecting women's stories surrounding orgasm and sexuality, which eventually became the book *Moan: Anonymous Essays on Female Orgasm*. I was striving to create something that explored the spectrum of female desire, both the joys and the frustrations. Digesting all those stories, and the reader reactions they inspired, led to the deceptively simple conclusion that touch is about way more than touch.

We've all seen the articles filled with tips on the best angles to hit the right points to have the best orgasm of our lives! And though I support anything that helps us zero in on feeling good, it's myopic to talk about sex as though it were an exercise class, where the most important factors are form and reps. Perhaps now more than ever, our sexual health—our sexual *morality*—demands that we consider the abstract forces informing our most enveloping of physical faculties.

TOUCH IS CULTURAL

Here's an exercise: Make a list of all the ways the country has changed in regard to sex and gender since the time you first had sex. (This won't work as well if you lost your virginity yesterday, but in this insane, 24-hour news cycle–nightmare from the depths of hell, it could still apply!)

What's on your list? Maybe it cites medical advancements such as the HPV vaccine, the FDA approval of PrEP or the over-the-counter liberation of Plan B. Maybe it dips into the advent of social media, which has nurtured cyber-harassment, revenge porn and the incel movement. Maybe it includes #MeToo, the growing media representation of LGBTQIA people, the latest threats to abortion access or the fact that our president has 17 (at press time) allegations of sexual misconduct against him.

The backdrop of our sex lives is under constant construction, and so is our relationship to touching and being touched. We're contending with new information, attitudes, language and laws, all of which can affect levels of physical sensitivity. While these anxieties may manifest in different ways during sex, a good starting point is the acknowledgement, shared by all partners, that it's not always possible to drop these concerns at the bedroom door.

Simply put, if politicians were crusading against sugar cones, it would probably be harder to enjoy your ice cream. And if you were to invite someone to your favorite parlor, it would be helpful to discuss how that hard-line anti-cone agenda might impact your enjoyment.

TOUCH IS EMOTIONAL

Emotion lives in our bodies. Whenever we encounter situations in which we want to cry, scream or simply speak out, we tense up. We clench our jaws, raise our shoulders and squeeze our hands into fists. Years of layered-on tension impact our bodies and our minds: We store the things that happen to us inside ourselves, and even if we're doing the work to exorcise our demons, we're all carrying around a lot of shit—especially when it comes to something as powerful as sex.

Getting touched can arouse feelings ranging from ecstasy to terror, and we may not be intellectually able to name those feelings in the moment; the message can be as primal as "This feels good" or "This feels bad." But however schematic the emotional language may be, it's important to be tuned in to it. When we disregard our feelings or pretend complex emotion isn't possible or allowed during sex, we're setting the stage for miscommunication, or worse.

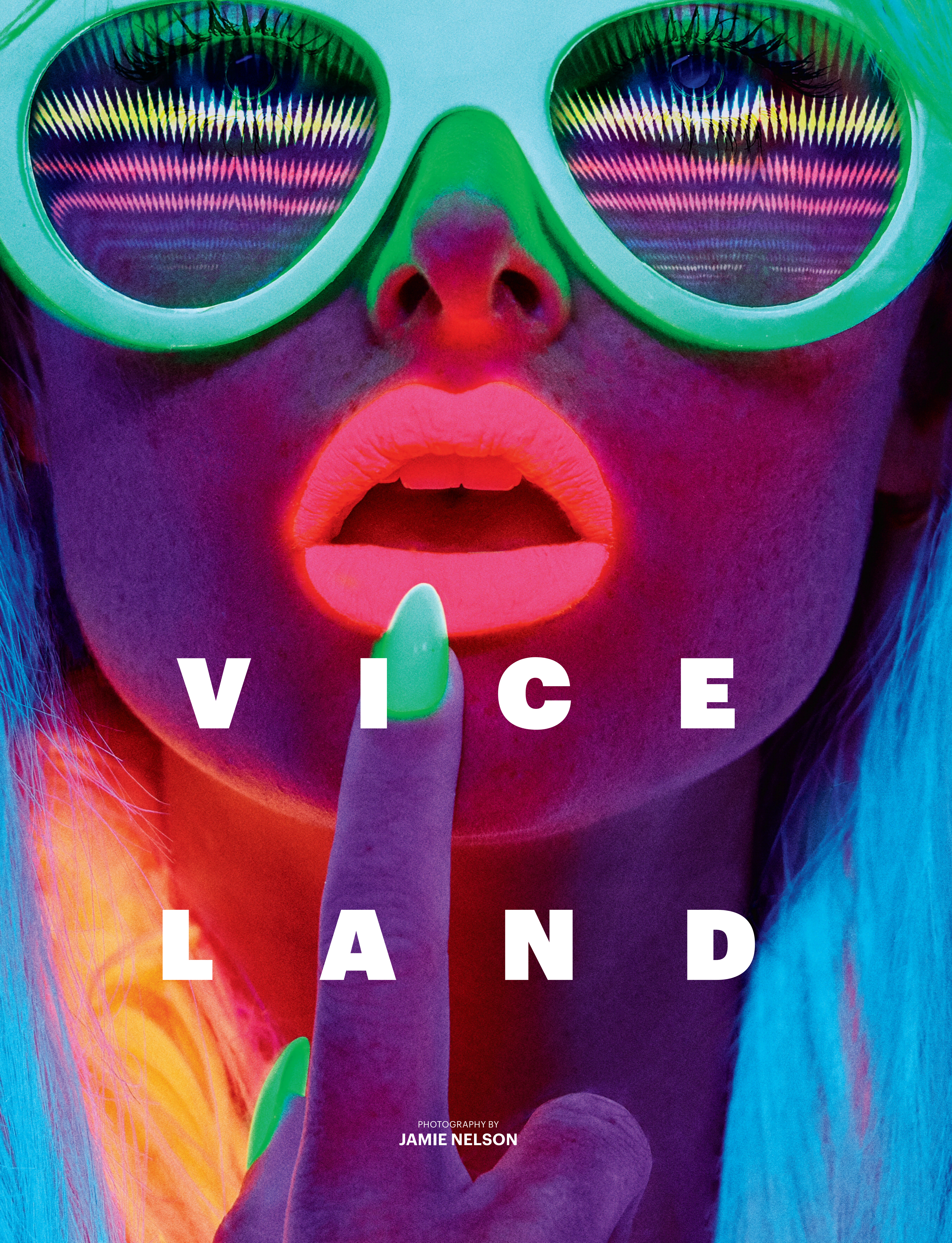
TOUCH IS INDIVIDUAL

Here's the simplest takeaway of all, reinforced constantly over the four years I spent collecting people's sex stories: The same shit doesn't work on everyone.

We all have different offerings—and allergies—on our sexual menus. It can be maddening to discover that the thing that drove your last partner wild with pleasure disgusts your current bedfellow, but remember that there's joy in the endless variety and potential for experimentation, and that touch can expand and evolve.

Now, I'm not insisting that we over-analyze every erotic insecurity and awkward moment. I'm merely suggesting that we have some baseline compassion and conscience—that we enter sexual scenarios (and, ideally, the spaces that come before them) with the awareness that they take place within a dense ecosystem of personal, cultural and, of course, biological forces.

It's my hope that this awareness will help us all find two things: our voices when touch is uncomfortable, and the freedom to explore all the pleasure touch can bring. ■



VICE LAND

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
JAMIE NELSON

Pride. Gluttony. Lust. Envy. Greed. Wrath. Sloth. Seen in a different light—in this case a black light illuminating a world teeming with Day-Glo hues and sumptuous skin—these capacious terms could just as easily be labeled the Seven Lively Sins. Photographer Jamie Nelson partnered with Playmates Megan Samperi (February 2018) and Milan Dixon (October 2017) to present a new vision of the capital vices—one that's a little more ambiguous than the nightmarish canvases of antiquity. You might even find a little joy glowing through all the wickedness. And if you don't see traces of yourself in any of these pages, be our guest and cast the first stone.

PLAYBOY

HE RIT AG E

THE VILLAGE PEOPLE • WINNING THE PUBIC WARS • CLASSIC CARTOONS • PLAYBOY'S COLORFUL HISTORY • 1976 PMOY LILLIAN MÜLLER • VINTAGE ADVISOR • A STEAMY VEGAS SCENE

THE ULTIMATE MALE FANTASY

FORTY YEARS AGO, SIX ICONS OF QUEER AMERICA TOOK CENTER STAGE AT THE WORLD'S HETERO MECCA

BY **GERRICK D. KENNEDY**

Inside the packed Great Hall of the Playboy Mansion, atop a stage washed in purple and yellow lights, six sex symbols shimmied and gyrated to a pulsing disco beat. Dressed in skintight costumes that left little to the imagination, they not only danced, they belted out tunes. But these seductive performers weren't Centerfolds—they were the Village People, and they had brought their act to the hottest home in America.

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It was the fall of 1979, and disco had reached its climax. Gloria Gaynor had released the splendid empowerment anthem "I Will Survive" the previous year, and Rod Stewart had the world asking, "Da Ya Think I'm Sexy?" Donna Summer was on top of the charts. Diana Ross, Sister Sledge and Chic were churning out indelible slices of sparkling dance music. And the Village People were at the height of their stardom.

It made sense, then, that when Hugh Hefner decided to throw a roller-disco pajama party on the posh grounds of the Playboy Mansion, the Village People would be tapped as the night's musical guests.

Watching the bash, taped in October 1979 and aired the following month as an ABC prime-time special, feels like taking a madcap trip through a forgotten bit of Playboy history. Guests included a skate-happy James Caan, a tennis-playing Cheryl Tiegs and a smiling Patty Hearst.

Hosted by the dashing Richard Dawson, the event was billed as a "wild all-night party of music, laughter and roller disco." Naturally the camera gravitated toward the bevy of sun-kissed models that descended on the Mansion grounds during the first portion of the show, with long stretches of screen time dedicated to shots of scantily clad women dancing on skates or frolicking in the Grotto. Although the Village People were the main attraction, other entertainers also performed: Chuck Mangione was there to play the flugelhorn, and Wayland Flowers's rowdy puppet Madame delivered unmannerly zingers throughout the program. Video footage of Playmate photo shoots—nothing too revealing for the ABC presentation—was also incorporated into the show.

Jazz, jokes and feminine beauty—standard fare for PLAYBOY. ("When Hef throws a party, he really throws a party," Dawson says in one bit, paying more attention to the bikini-clad models than to the camera.)

But it is the Village People, grinding and slinking alongside Playmates as they perform two songs in the heart of hetero America, who steal the show. Considering the group was created foremost for men who found nirvana in gay clubs and certainly not in the world of Playboy, the irony almost astonishes.

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At the Playboy Mansion, eroticism and escapism coalesced to create an exhilarating fantasy land. Disco music had the power to harness those same forces and achieve exactly the same thing. Hugh Hefner and the Village People didn't target identical audiences, but they both created and catered to male fantasies.

Everything about the Village People, from their image—exaggerated versions of masculine tropes—to the catchy, coded songs they recorded, was crafted through a queer lens. As the group's co-founder and manager Jacques Morali told *Rolling Stone* in 1978 about his motivation for creating the disco act, "Gay people have no [musical group]...nobody to personalize the gay people, you know?"

Arriving at the dawn of the 1970s, disco helped define a time of emerging liberation for LGBTQ America. After decades of suppression and erasure, the 1969 Stonewall riots and the gay civil rights movement had ushered in an era of relative openness among queer people. And the slinky, blissful grooves emanating from the disco scene provided a ubiquitous soundtrack at gay clubs across the country—safe havens where men could feel free to explore their sexuality.

As the story goes, it was a gay club in Greenwich Village that sparked the vision for the Village People, a group concept conceived by Morali and his business partner, Henri Belolo. Casablanca Records signed off on the project even before the producers began to recruit members, outside of singer Victor Willis.

Although disco was the rage among gay men, it was a genre dominated by female vocalists. Morali and Belolo, French immigrants looking to cash in on this latest American music craze, shrewdly saw a niche that had yet to be exploited and cobbled together a group to attract a gay male audience. Appropriating straight American masculinity served a dual purpose: Morali knew that strong male images—a cowboy, Native American, cop, soldier (or sailor), construction worker, biker—would titillate gay men *and* appeal to a broader (straighter) audience unable to decipher the gay innuendoes and double entendres sprinkled throughout the music. Although, as John Rockwell wrote in *The New York Times* in 1979, "those in the know (any five-year-old with a brain) can pick up on their homosexual subtexts."

The Village People's 1977 self-titled debut was so specifically gay, with songs about queer meccas such as San Francisco and

Opening page: *The 1979 Village People lineup—Randy Jones, David Hodo, Glenn Hughes, Victor Willis, Alex Briley and Felipe Rose—as photographed for a* PLAYBOY *article on audio tech.* ***Top:*** *Rose performs at the taping of the Playboy Roller Disco and Pajama Party.* ***Above:*** *"Leatherman" character Hughes; one of Wayland Flowers's puppets teased him during the program: "You Village People are my kind of people—tacky!"* ***Right:*** *The group gets its groove on dancing with the crowd in the Playboy Mansion's Great Hall.*

Fire Island, that member David Hodo (the construction worker) once described it as "possibly the gayest album ever." With their beefcake physiques, accentuated by costumes that displayed their bulging muscles, the Village People toyed with fantasy images to establish themselves as gay sex symbols—even if not every member identified as queer. They presented ideals that gay men could aspire to—the type of men they wanted to be, and the type of men they desired. *The Advocate,* the oldest gay magazine in America, declared the group "a godsend."

By 1979, the Village People were in their prime. The sextet had become a global phenomenon after the campy "Y.M.C.A." exploded on the pop charts, taking the group from a gay-club-circuit staple to an international crossover act in high demand. They toured North America, "Y.M.C.A." went to number one in multiple countries, and a $20 million musical comedy featuring their songs (*Can't Stop the Music,* a Razzie-award-winning flop) was released in June 1980. The Village People had become one of the hottest acts on the planet.

But then the group began to reverse course and rewrite their own narrative. Once open about the performers' sexual identities, by 1980, Morali was downplaying their sexuality.

"Look, the Village People is the only group that is black, white, straight and gay," Morali told PLAYBOY in a 1980 article in which he attempted to distance the group from any queer subtext. "They are successful because they represent many sides of America; because they are fun and sing happy songs," he said. "They are very much gay-influenced.... But they are not a gay group. To say this will kill them!"

To Morali, a gay man, it might have seemed that the group's commercial survival hung in the balance. Instead of pushing the cultural visibility of a marginalized community, he wanted to focus on appealing to the masses. The move was disappointing and startling; after all, the Village People's disco act had broken ground, achieving mainstream success without toning down their queer image—perhaps, in fact, by playing it up. But as their biggest hit, "Y.M.C.A.," ostensibly a paean to gay cruising, was being sung and danced to the world over, the group was pivoting away from fully claiming queerness.

The sanitization did not go unnoticed. "In order to get themselves on the Macy's float...and in the hope of getting their image slapped onto kids' lunch boxes, [the Village People] went along with the sexlessness that seems a precondition of gay male representation in pop culture," writes Alice Echols, historian and self-proclaimed "discologist," in her 2010 book *Hot Stuff: Disco and the Remaking of American Culture.*

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Yet at the Playboy Mansion in 1979, the Village People and their

HUGH HEFNER AND THE VILLAGE PEOPLE DIDN'T TARGET THE SAME AUDIENCES, BUT BOTH CREATED—AND CATERED TO—MALE FANTASIES.

Opposite page: *Producers Jacques Morali and Henri Belolo (foreground) pose with the Village People, the disco sensation they co-created.* ***Top:*** *The Village People performed two songs for Playboy's Roller Disco and Pajama Party: "Rock and Roll Is Back Again" and "Ready for the '80s," both off their 1979 Live and Sleazy album.* ***Above:*** *Macho men in action at the Mansion.*

disco-fevered audience stood on the brink of monumental shifts that would forever change American culture. The death of disco at the turn of the 1980s gave way to dark years marked by Reaganomics, a devastating war on drugs and an AIDS epidemic that ravaged the same gay Edens the Village People sang about. It would be decades before a new era dawned for queer America: Today, medical advances have largely eradicated HIV's status as a death sentence; gay couples can walk down the aisle and adopt children; trans rights are at the forefront of a national movement. Queer culture has permeated the mainstream, and artists no longer feel the same pressure to stifle their sexuality in order to grow their careers.

Perhaps Morali and the Village People could not have foreseen this moment, one in which equality is closer at hand than ever before—and one in which the group's songs endure, beloved and enshrined in our musical history. But on that night 40 years ago, a leather daddy subversively sang to America about casual gay sex with a wink and a nod toward freedom. And Playboy was happy to host. ■

Stiff COMPETITION

WHEN AN AMBITIOUS IMITATOR TOOK AIM AT *PLAYBOY,* THE MAGAZINE WAS FORCED TO CONFRONT A HAIRY ISSUE

BY **PATTY FARMER**

The Playboy Rabbit Head found itself in unfamiliar territory in 1969: *Penthouse* ads. Bob Guccione, editor-publisher of the upstart British magazine, had decided to take his publication to the States, and he wanted advertisers to know exactly what he was targeting. "We're going rabbit-hunting," read the cut line below an unsubtle image of the Rabbit in a rifle's crosshairs. Hugh Hefner's hugely successful formula for PLAYBOY, it seemed, was too tempting for imitators to ignore.

Guccione's Rabbit hunt, and Hefner's response to it, soon escalated into what became punningly known as the "pubic wars"—a clash in which the two print titans battled for full-frontal supremacy of the publishing industry's lucrative nude-mag niche.

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Guccione deserves credit: PLAYBOY was a smart target. Since its December 1953 debut, circulation had climbed steadily, reaching 5.7 million by December 1969. Over those 16 years, Hefner had captured the market—other men's magazines were to PLAYBOY what fleas are to a bear. By daring to be more risqué, PLAYBOY had left *Esquire,* its inspiration and nearest competitor, in the dust. As *Esquire* editor Clay Felker bluntly put it to *Rolling Stone,* "PLAYBOY had out-titted us."

In 1969 Guccione saw a similar opportunity and decided to take a shot at Hef, publishing the first U.S. issue of *Penthouse* that September. (It had been a U.K. lad mag for four years.) That February, the 147-year-old *Saturday Evening Post* had effectively gone out of business. These two

milestones are more closely related than one might think. At the dawn of the 1970s, the industry was rapidly changing: Old-time general interest, family-friendly magazines were losing their readership to television; even venerable *Life* magazine, long a publishing staple, would switch from a weekly to an intermittent schedule in 1972. But specialty magazines, those covering subjects from sports to science to automobiles, were growing in popularity, and the highest growth area was the one least likely to be served by TV. This was the PLAYBOY audience: mostly young to middle-aged men who wanted to look at semi-naked models and read intellectually stimulating short stories and nonfiction. That format, combining revealing photos of women with excellent editorial fare, was Hefner's masterstroke—and what Guccione sought to replicate.

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The Brooklyn-born, New Jersey–raised Guccione had originally set out to become a painter and, like Hefner, had tried his hand at cartooning, though he eventually became a photographer. Living in London in the early 1960s, he and his wife launched a photo service that sold provocative pinups of young women via mail order ($2, or the British equivalent, for 10 pictures). Having had his cartoons rejected by virtually every magazine in town, he resolved to launch his own title to publish them. An informal study of London newsstands convinced him that the most successful periodical in England was the Chicago-based PLAYBOY. "I thought, I'll do a magazine using the same formula—pretty girls, highbrow editorial—but aimed at a British audience," Guccione says in an interview included in *Filthy Gorgeous,* the 2013 documentary about his life. To woo prospective investors, "I brought a copy of PLAYBOY around with me, and I said, 'Just imagine this with the name *Penthouse* on it.' "

Premiering in England in 1965, *Penthouse* was a hit. Guccione gradually worked out his plan to launch in the States. He connected with the largest magazine distributor in America, the Curtis Circulation Company, which by that time was keen to find new profit channels—it had just lost a major cash cow with the demise of *The Saturday Evening Post.*

Guccione's pitch wasn't far off from his eventual product: He copied PLAYBOY practically feature for feature. Instead of a Centerfold showcasing a monthly Playmate, Guccione's foldout spotlighted a monthly Pet; where PLAYBOY had the long-running *Little Annie Fanny* comic, *Penthouse* installed *Oh, Wicked Wanda,* a rather grungy knockoff of Harvey Kurtzman's pop culture classic. Guccione launched his own Penthouse Club in London in response to Hefner's Playboy Club empire. Even the word *penthouse* stemmed from Playboy history, being the title and setting of Hefner's first late-night TV series, *Playboy's Penthouse.*

So what did *Penthouse* give readers that was new? More skin, more heat. The major weapon in Guccione's arsenal was his willingness to depict what PLAYBOY had not.

"In the wake of the so-called free-love '60s, *Penthouse* chose to break open the market and distinguish itself from PLAYBOY by being raunchier: more overtly sexual photographs, pubic pictures, bizarro letters to the editor, models who ran the gamut as opposed to PLAYBOY's girl-next-door types," says David Friend, author of *The Naughty Nineties: The Triumph of the American Libido.* Although it flirted with pubic hair on a couple of occasions, including a pictorial of actress and dancer Paula Kelly in August 1969, PLAYBOY had never shown an explicit frontal shot. Guccione saw the open door and walked through it.

The February 1970 *Penthouse* showed a hint of pubic hair in one pictorial, followed by several pubic-hair-revealing shots in the April edition, causing small-town censors to yank the issue off newsstands. Censors may have been incensed, but readers were beguiled, and by September 1972 *Penthouse*'s sales had climbed to 2.2 million—nearly 10 times what it had started at just three years earlier. That was still less than a third of PLAYBOY's circulation, which had hit an all-time high of more than 7 million, but Hefner eventually came to feel adjustments were needed.

"At first Hef tried to avoid engaging or responding," remembers Dick Rosenzweig, Hefner's right-hand man who had been with the company since 1958. "He definitely tried to convey a 'So what?' attitude in the beginning."

But soon enough PLAYBOY was showing more and more of the pubic area—territory that had previously been obscured or blocked. In the January 1971 issue, Hefner allowed a peek of blonde pubic hair in Liv Lindeland's Playmate pictorial and a year later went full frontal with a tasteful Centerfold of Playmate Marilyn Cole. Much more provocative poses followed. This "arms" race—not to mention legs, breasts and buttocks—evolved beyond full-frontal nudity to other arenas previously unexplored by PLAYBOY: fetishism, girl-on-girl, women touching themselves.

"The point was cultural and aesthetic but also market driven," says Friend via e-mail. "The PLAYBOY philosophy, according to *Penthouse*, was, in effect, your father's ethos—sexuality disguised. *Penthouse* was for younger and more liberated (read lowbrow, low-forehead) readers, epitomized by the crotch shots. PLAYBOY was somewhat crotchety in comparison and hid its treasures amid serious fiction and big-name bylines." To use Felker's construction, *Penthouse* wanted to out-crotch PLAYBOY.

"Hef was conflicted," remembers former art director Kerig Pope about the magazine's new direction, "but the art department made it clear they were in support of showing more."

The photography was far from the only PLAYBOY staple affected by the changes. "The whole book was 'heated up,' " from fashion to articles, as Thomas Weyr recounts in *Reaching for Paradise,* his extensively researched volume on the company. The shift even applied to LeRoy Neiman's famous Femlin drawings. "An editorial decision was relayed to me to introduce pubic hair on my lovable, wholesome creation," writes Neiman in the 50th anniversary collection celebrating his work. "At first I resisted, mainly because it posed a design problem. Eventually I came up with a solution regarding the pubic hair matter…a simple black triangle."

Although the rise of *Penthouse* seems the proximate cause for the changes, Hefner claimed there were other considerations governing his actions. "At the top of the list was the more permissive attitude in films," he told *Rolling Stone. Deep Throat,* after all, had come out in 1972, taking porn mainstream. "The decision to make the magazine what I call, not more permissive but more mature, is a matter of what we felt, in our judgment, our part of society was ready for."

• • •

It wasn't just *Penthouse* that was crowding the field of men's magazines: *Coq, Players, Dude* and *Genesis* were just a few

Previous spread: *Paula Kelly's August 1969 pictorial is often credited as* PLAYBOY*'s first display of pubic hair.* ***Top left:*** *Liv Lindeland's exposed tuft in January 1971 was a Playmate first; in this shot from her Playmate of the Year feature, she continues the trend.* ***Top right:*** *January 1972 Playmate Marilyn Cole, shown here in a photo from her 1973 Playmate of the Year pictorial, was the first full-frontal Centerfold.* ***Right:*** *August 1959 marks the true earliest appearance of pubic hair in* PLAYBOY*; the photo was retouched so the dancer's uncovered pubis might be mistaken for a G-string.*

of the titles to enter the fray. *Gallery* was an even more direct clone of PLAYBOY than *Penthouse* had ever tried to be, renting an office less than a mile from Hefner's staff. "I guess I've been flattered more sincerely—and blatantly—than any other magazine publisher in history," Hefner once quipped. In 1972 Playboy purchased the French title *Lui* and changed it to *Oui,* hoping that this younger, bolder, kinkier and more "continental" version of PLAYBOY could dig directly into *Penthouse*'s circulation. (After a blockbuster first year, *Oui* sank steadily into the red before Playboy parted with it in 1981.) Then, in 1974, Larry Flynt's *Hustler* arrived, quickly establishing that Flynt wouldn't hesitate to go beyond what either Hefner or Guccione could abide.

For Hefner, the "war" culminated in late 1975 with back-to-back controversial covers: Two bare-breasted models embraced under the teaser line SAPPHO: STUNNING PORTRAITS OF WOMEN IN LOVE on the October cover; a seated woman, one hand down her panties, blouse and legs spread wide, graced the November issue. Readers may have welcomed the more suggestive content, but many companies buying full-page ads did not. "PLAYBOY's foray into explicit shots, lesbianism and female masturbation triggered outrage among advertisers, who deluged its offices with complaints about obscenity," Steven Watts writes in his Hefner biography, *Mr. Playboy.* There was $40 million in annual ad revenue at stake, a Playboy executive fumed. Hefner decided to change course. "Gentlemen, we have lost our compass," he declared, telling his team to cool down the content. "I [told] my staff we would not go down the road of imitating our imitators," he later said.

That December he promised shareholders and newsstands alike that moving forward his covers would be less risqué. Besides keeping advertisers happy, there was perhaps another simple reason behind the revised stance: "Hefner's heart was not in the raunch war," as Weyr put it.

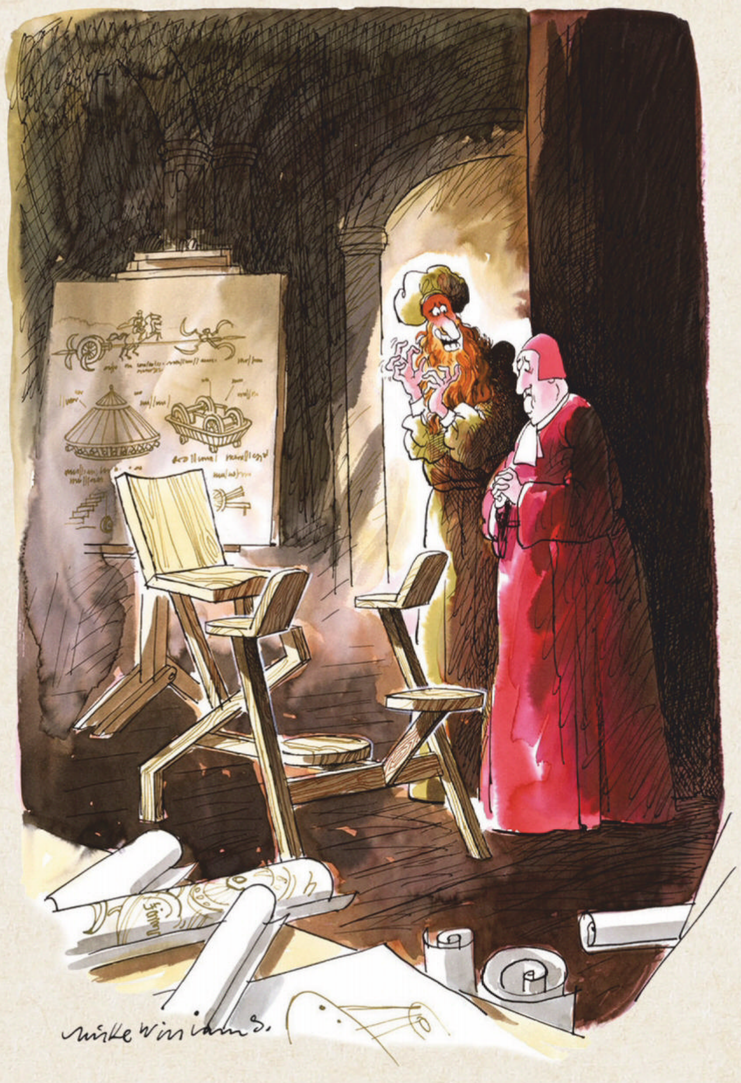
• • •

The pubic wars were, in Hefner's own words, "much ado about foliage." Considering the tumultuous era from the perspective of 2013, Hef remarked, "It's almost comical to look back now at all the fuss over pubic hair." Indeed, photos that 50 years ago qualified as racy today seem practically innocuous, even quaint; in the intervening decades, attitudes and norms have changed significantly.

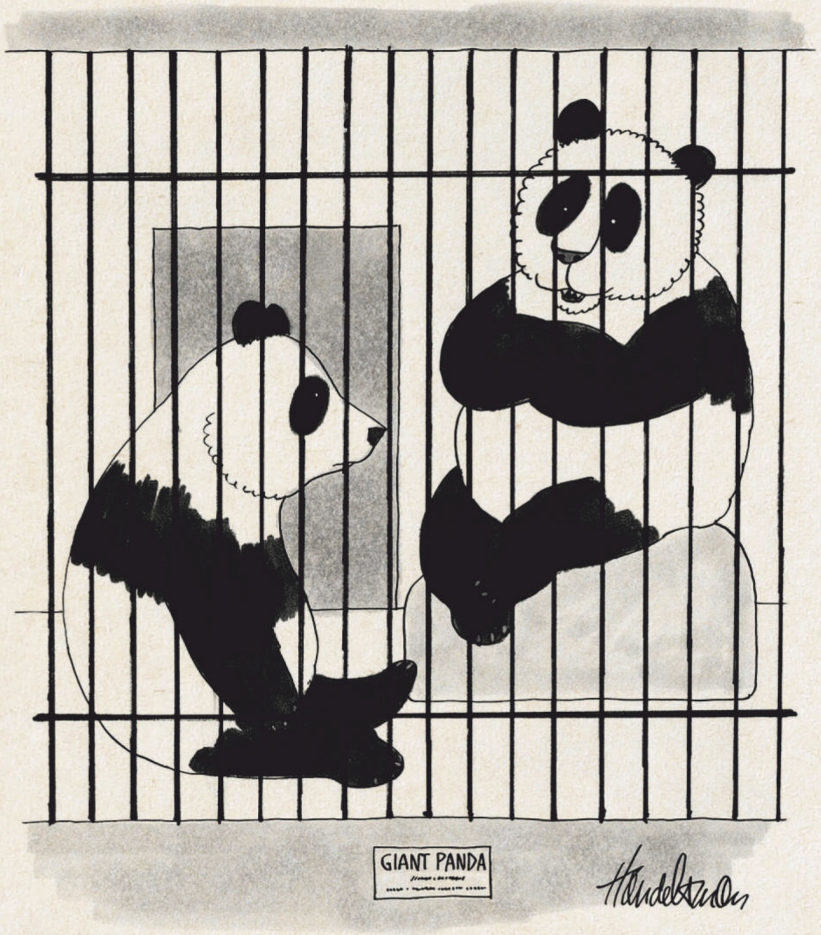
Those changes have naturally affected the business, though readers may be surprised: Today in PLAYBOY's pages, how much skin (and hair) is shown is a decision made not by the editor but by the model—a practice that is perhaps the biggest reveal of all. ■

OPENING SPREAD: LAWRENCE SCHILLER

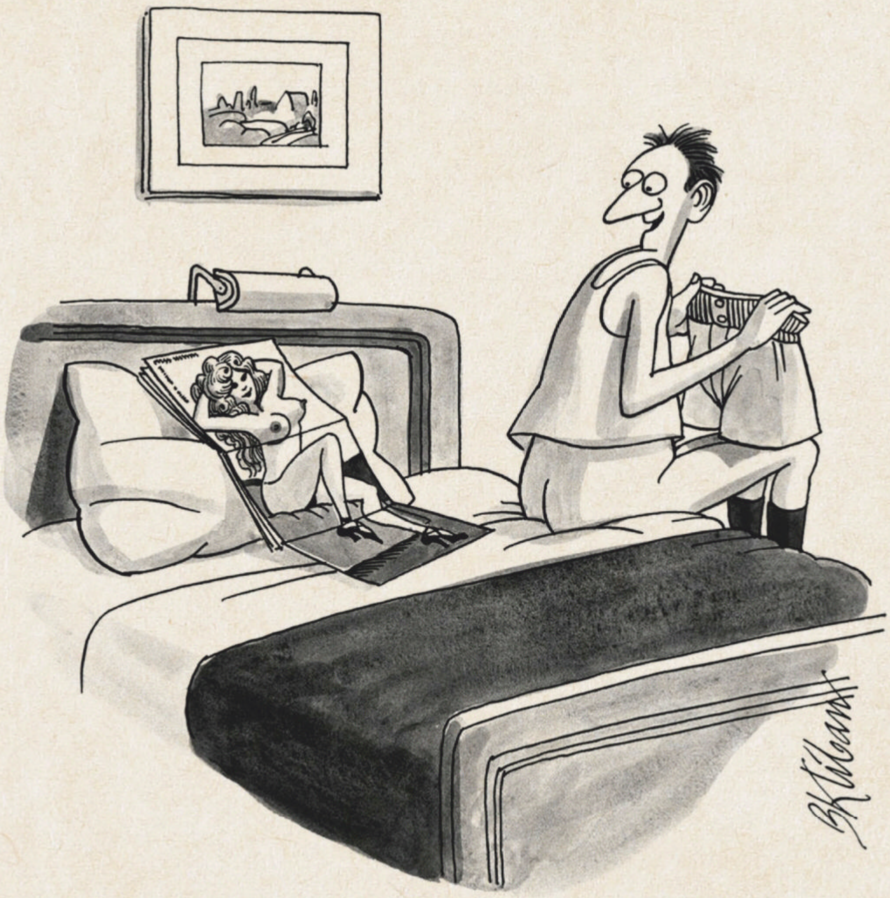
CLASSIC


mike williams.

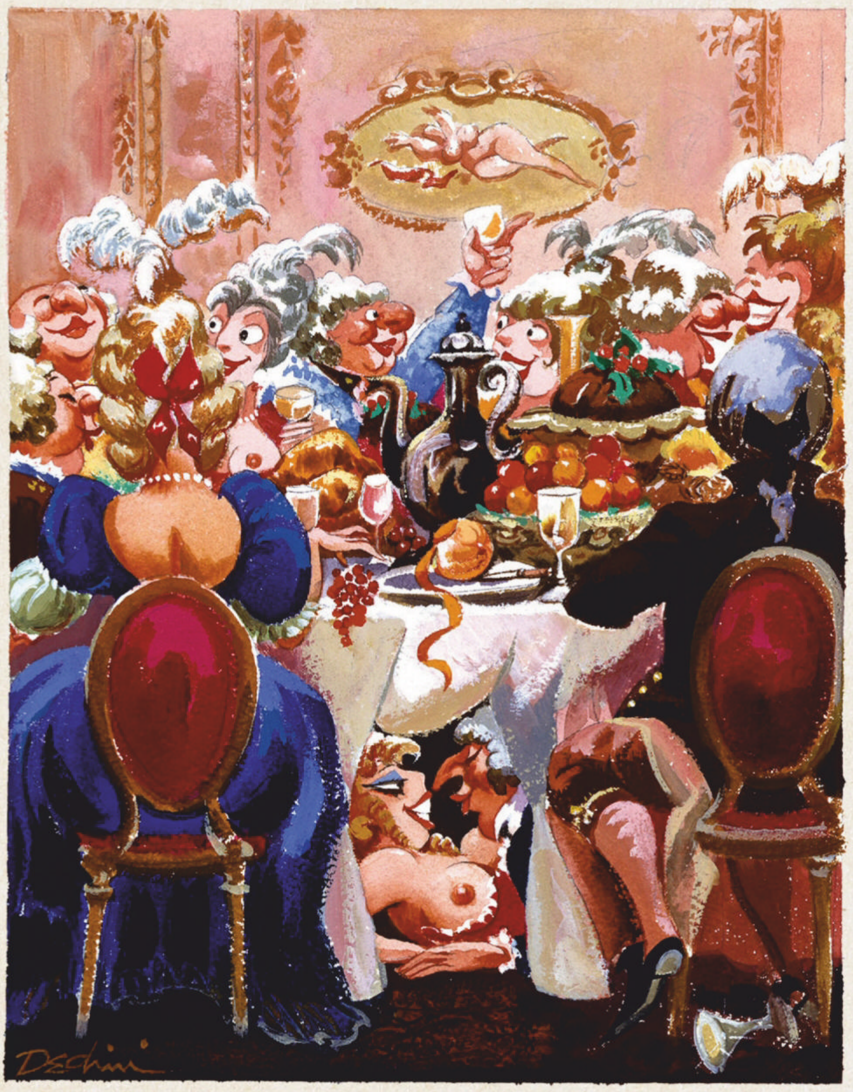
"Well…uh…no, your Eminence…it's not exactly a flying machine."


GIANT PANDA
Handelsman

"If, as you say, it's no crime to be a panda, perhaps you can explain why we were arrested."

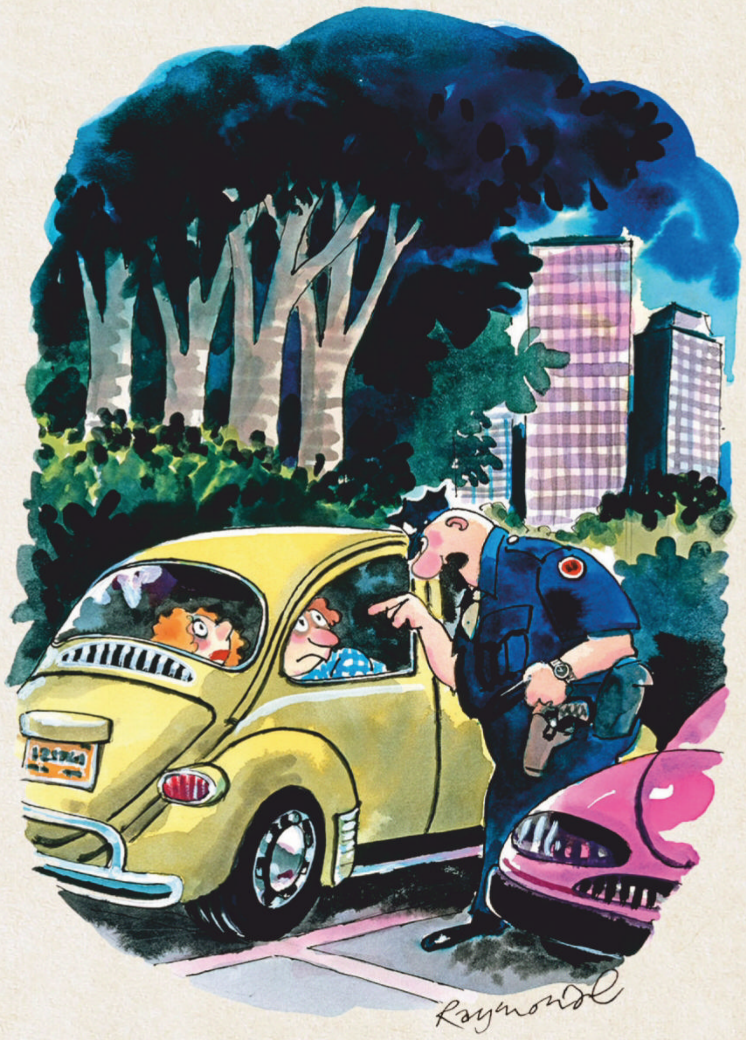


"Naughty girl!… Have you been peeking?"

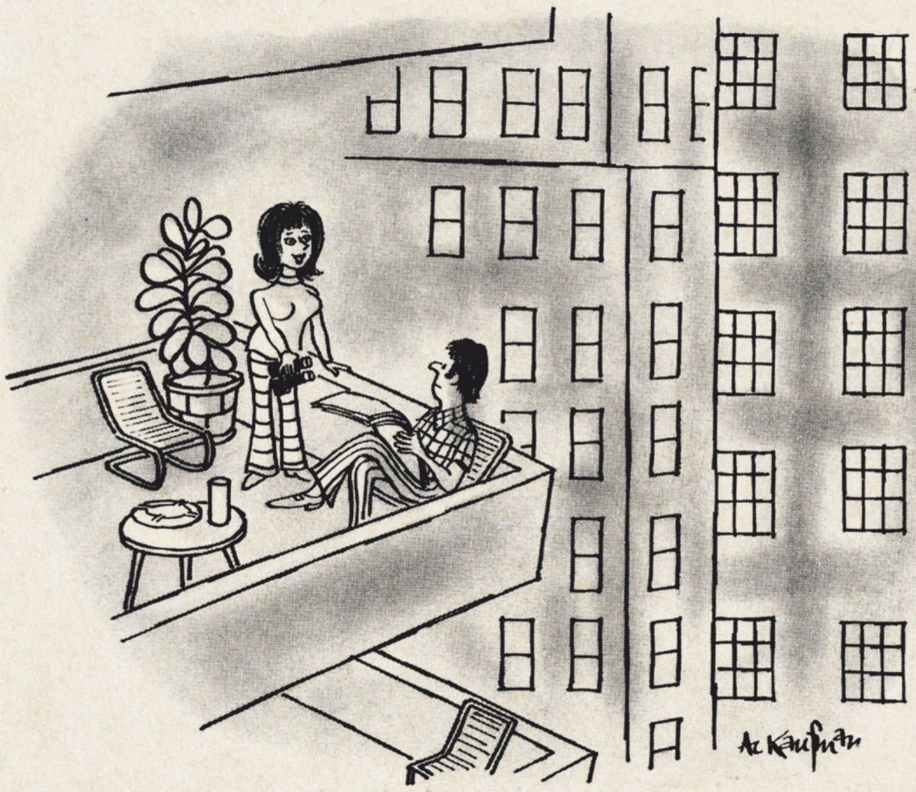


"I think we should be getting back before we're missed."

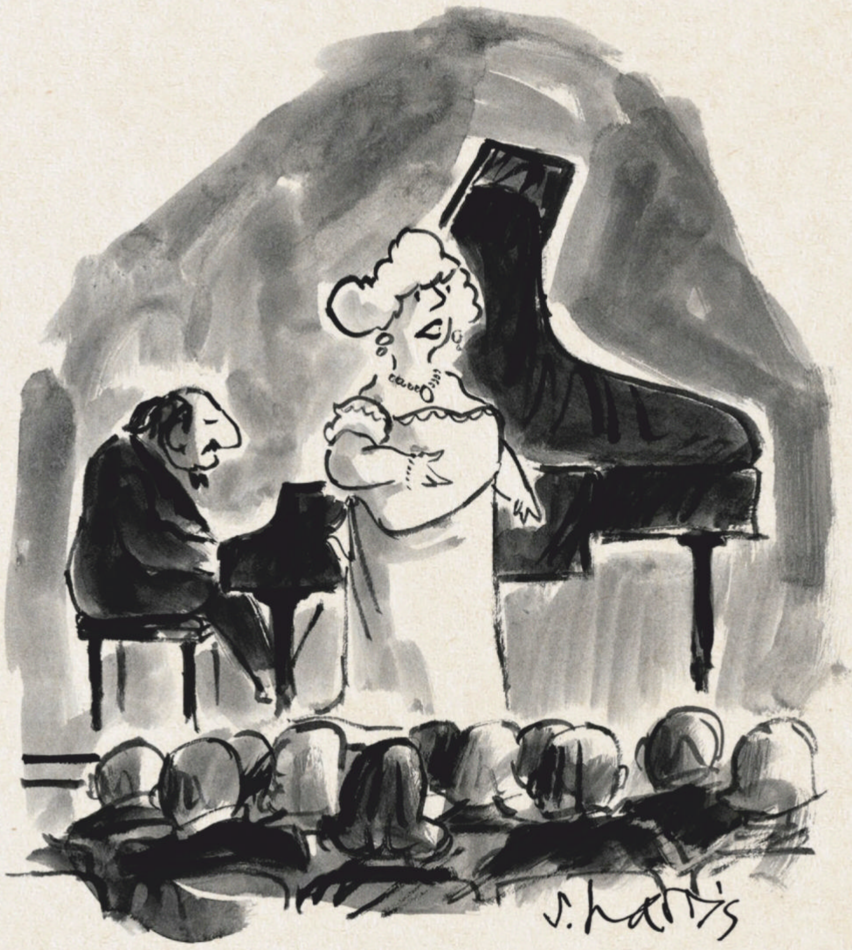
CARTOONS



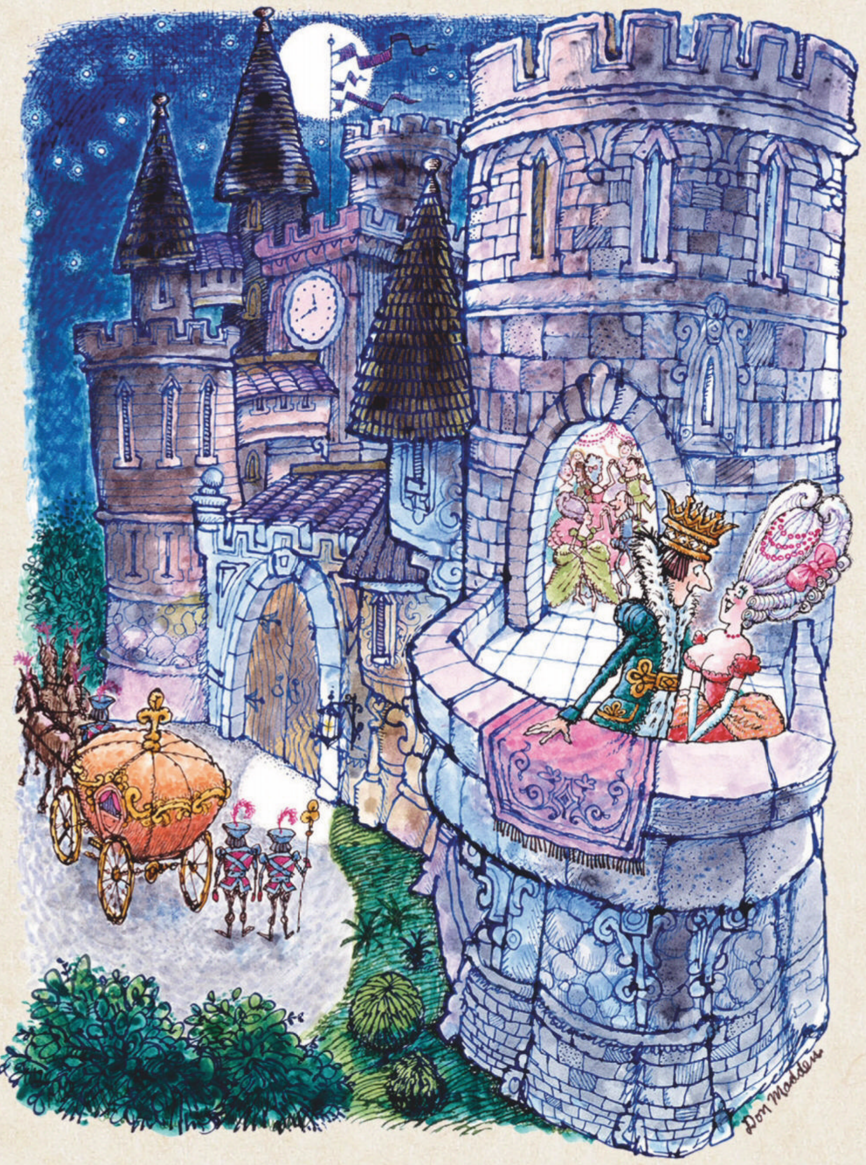
"Hear me, and hear me good, kid. Unroll the condom all the way to the base of the erect penis, taking care to expel the air from the reservoir at the tip by squeezing between the forefinger and thumb."



"Look at the corner apartment on the 12th floor. That's what I want you to do to me."



"This evening's program consists of Brahms, Mozart, Strauss and a rap piece commissioned for this occasion."



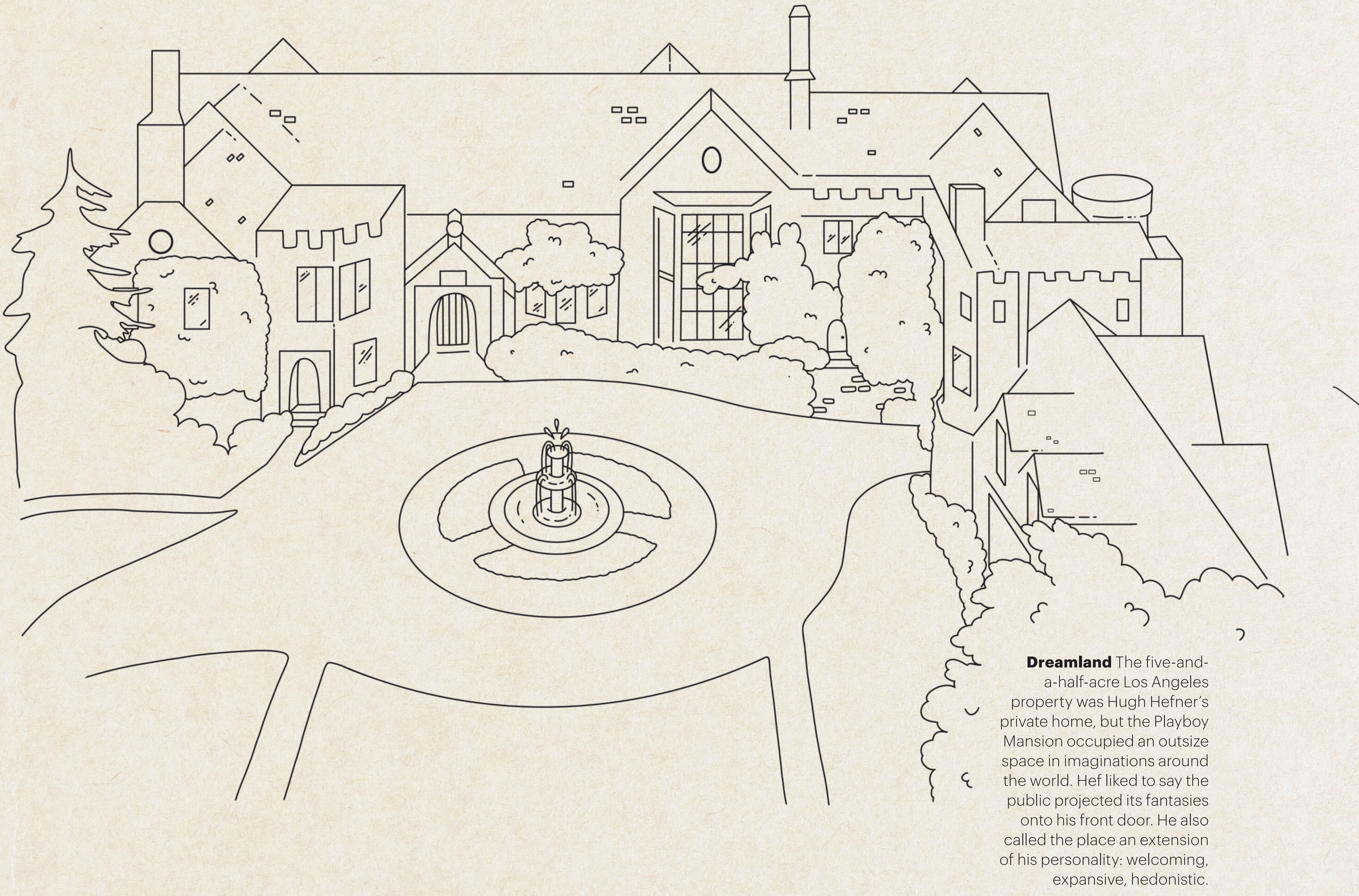
"I have to leave before midnight, but I have time for a quickie."

ILLUSTRATIONS BY **KATIE BAILIE**

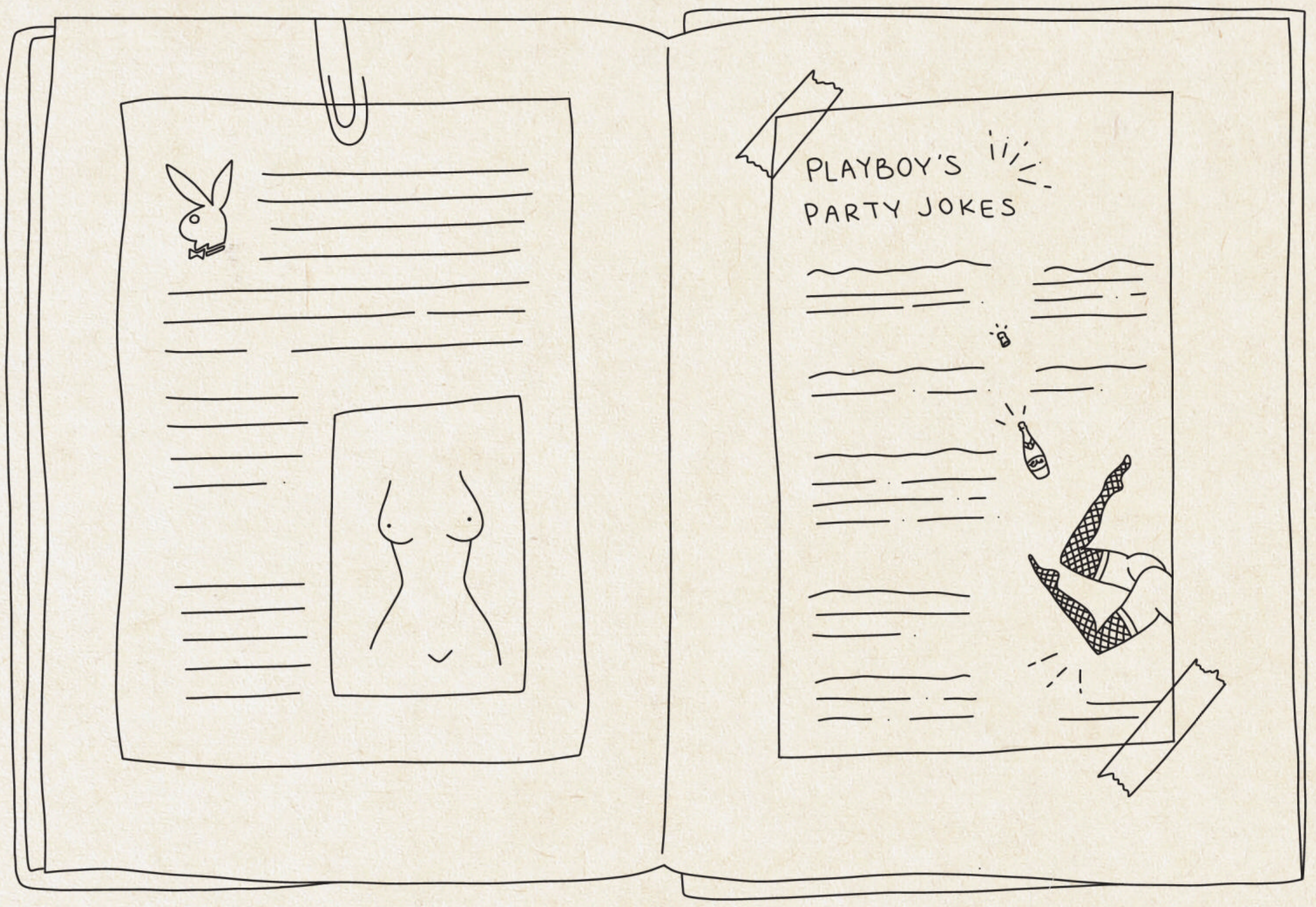
COLORING THE 65th

An anniversary is an invitation to reflect on years gone by. Naturally, it's also an opportunity to celebrate. So with those two notions in mind, we pause for a moment at the tail end of our 65th year of publication to contemplate and commemorate our remarkable history.

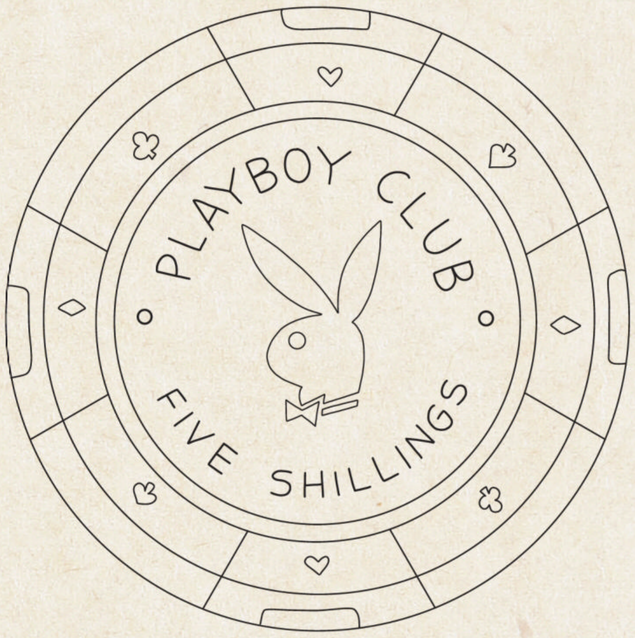
And after six and a half decades, Playboy has an enviable catalog of milestones and memories from which to draw—emphasis, in this case, on draw. Inspired by our past (the satirical *Playboy Coloring Book,* which ran in 1963), our present (*Pleasure,* an erotic coloring book available on PlayboyShop.com and downloadable from the App Store) and our future (which we're certain will be colorful), we hereby give you a curated collection of illustrated treasures. Grab your markers and release your inner artist as you take a brief tour of where we've been. Here's to where we're headed next.



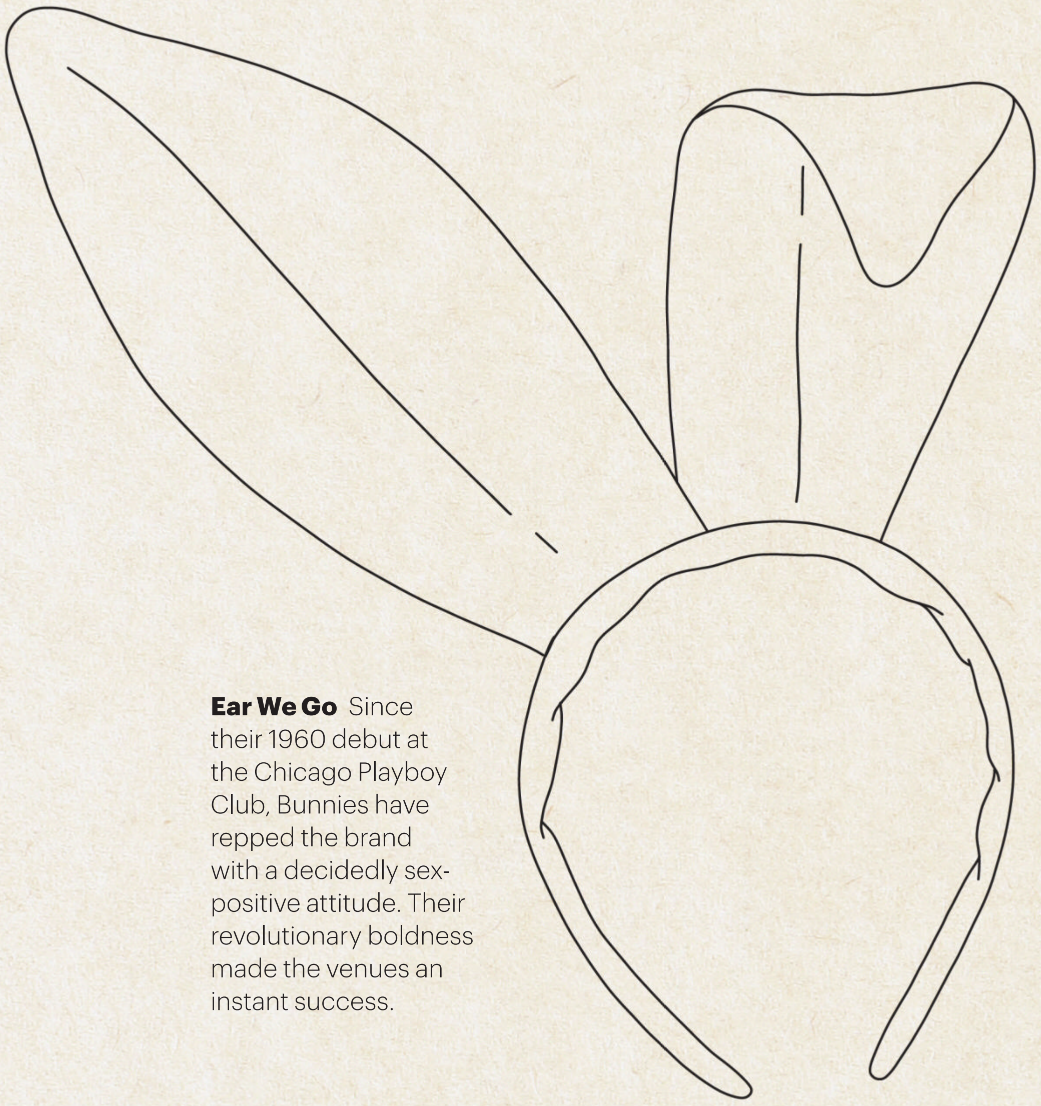
Dreamland The five-and-a-half-acre Los Angeles property was Hugh Hefner's private home, but the Playboy Mansion occupied an outsize space in imaginations around the world. Hef liked to say the public projected its fantasies onto his front door. He also called the place an extension of his personality: welcoming, expansive, hedonistic.



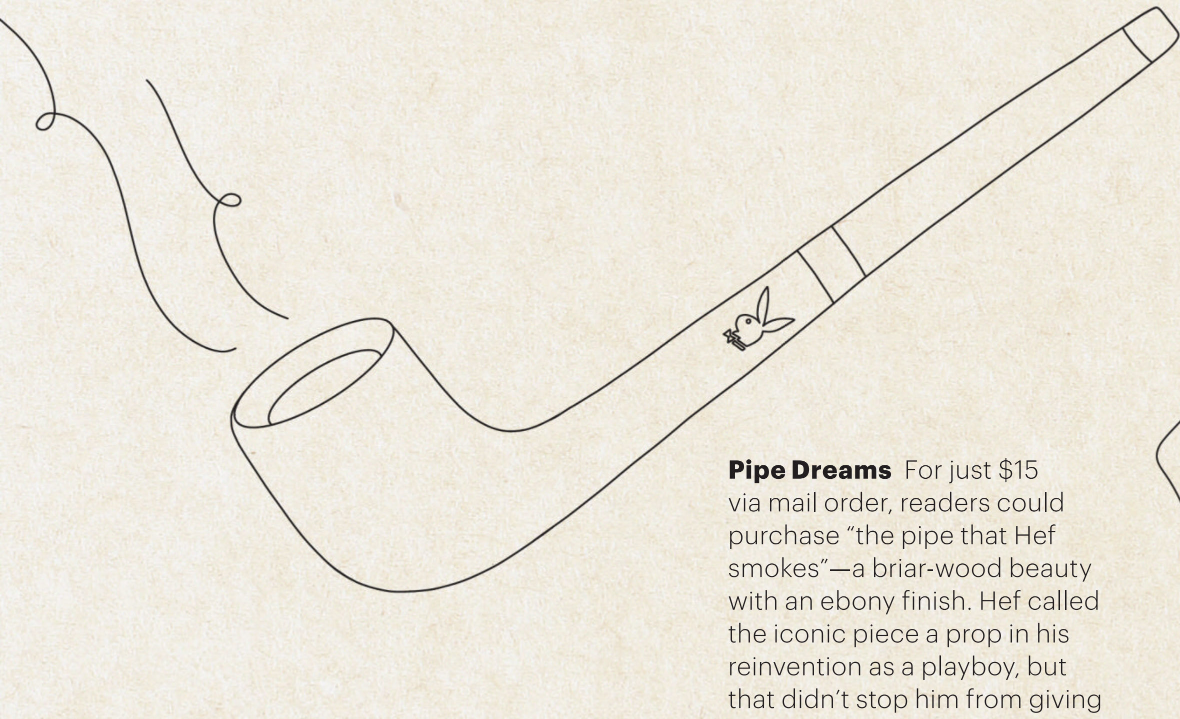
The Good Book Every great edifice needs a blueprint. For Hef, that blueprint was the "brown book." Starting in the early days of the magazine and lasting into the 21st century, a staffer created a butcher-paper paste-up of each issue of PLAYBOY for Hef to flip through, checking the pacing and flow before the real files were sent to press.



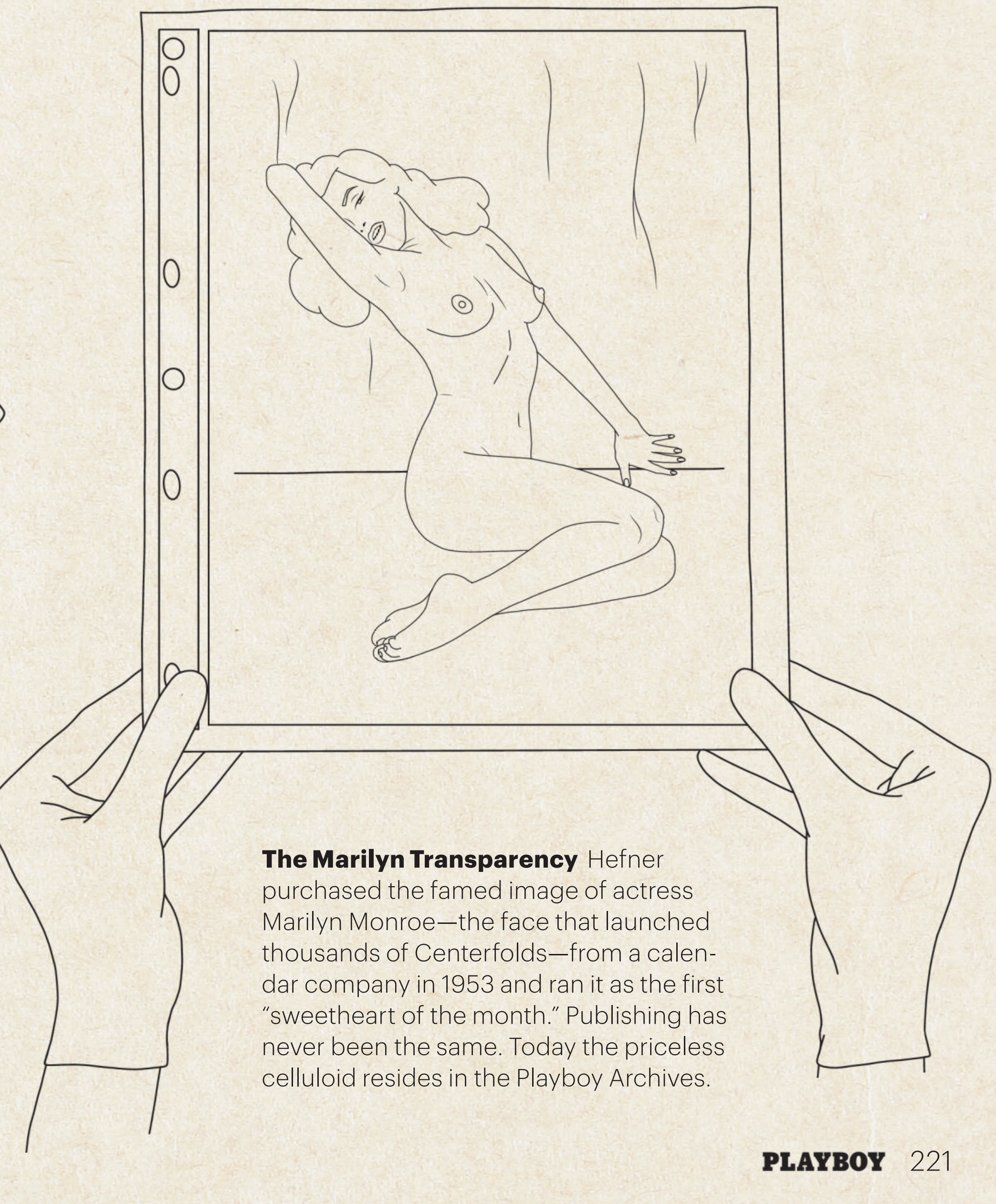
Poker Face The 1966 opening of the London Playboy Club, which housed the company's first casino, was a gamble that paid off big—until its gaming license was revoked in 1981. The late 1970s and early 1980s marked a turning point for the clubs, with nearly two dozen locations closing around the world.



Ear We Go Since their 1960 debut at the Chicago Playboy Club, Bunnies have repped the brand with a decidedly sex-positive attitude. Their revolutionary boldness made the venues an instant success.



Pipe Dreams For just $15 via mail order, readers could purchase "the pipe that Hef smokes"—a briar-wood beauty with an ebony finish. Hef called the iconic piece a prop in his reinvention as a playboy, but that didn't stop him from giving up smoking for health reasons.



The Marilyn Transparency Hefner purchased the famed image of actress Marilyn Monroe—the face that launched thousands of Centerfolds—from a calendar company in 1953 and ran it as the first "sweetheart of the month." Publishing has never been the same. Today the priceless celluloid resides in the Playboy Archives.

Lillian Müller

OUR AUGUST 1975 PLAYMATE AND 1976 PMOY REFLECTS ON HER JOURNEY FROM SEX SYMBOL TO HEALTH GURU AND HOW THE BEST IS YET TO COME

I was brought up in southern Norway's beautiful countryside on a tiny farm. We had one cow, one pig, a few chickens, a dog, a couple of cats. My mother divorced my father when I was about two years old, and he moved out. We were quite poor, but my mother loved me and my brother and sisters very much and took exceptional care of us. By the time I was 11, she had to leave home to make enough money to support us. For five years she worked on an oil tanker out at sea and saved all her money; then she came home and bought a townhouse for all of us to live in.

I've always felt that God has a plan for me, and I've had a sense of mission. That has saved my life, I think, because it gave me the strength to survive poverty and the sadness of my mother leaving. It also helped me excel in school—I had that drive and desire to make something of myself. I grew up with the attitude that, well, maybe I'm down now, but I'm not out. I knew that when I grew up I would be somebody.

When I was almost finished with high school, I fell in love with a soldier and eventually moved with him to London, where I went to a modeling academy. I never thought in my wildest dreams that I was sexy. But after I graduated, I got so much work right away. I became a Page 3 girl in *The Sun*. Photographer Suze Randall saw me and asked if I would shoot a nude for her. I'd done topless for Page 3, but I'd never done any nudes. I felt so shy, but she convinced me. Then Hugh Hefner saw the photos, and before I knew it I was on my way to Chicago to shoot a Centerfold.

When I met him for the first time, I was so intimidated I could hardly say a word. I must have looked like a tomato, so red and self-conscious, and with no makeup because I was on my way to the photo shoot. He was in a limousine—I'd never even seen one before. The Mansion was so luxurious, I thought I'd gone to heaven. He asked me to dinner, but he couldn't get me to bed. I thought to myself, I'm going to get to know him first. I was in Chicago for a few weeks, but before Hef left for Los Angeles, he asked me to go with him. Sure! All I knew about L.A. was beaches and movie stars. We went to Playboy Mansion West, and guess who was there—Barbi Benton! Oh my God, I had no idea. I didn't know about her. We're talking *drama.* I didn't understand the reality of that relationship or that situation, or I probably would have just left. I don't know exactly what happened between them, but I stayed because Hef asked me to. And I fell in love with that man. Eventually we became romantically involved, but our relationship was a bit of a battle from the beginning. I didn't know I had to share him with other women. In the end, I couldn't handle it and left. After that—and after he forgave me for leaving—we were good friends, always in touch. We had a powerful connection.

PLAYBOY was a big beginning for me. Over the years I've done so many television programs, films and reality shows around the world, in Europe and America—there are even documentaries about my life! I've been blessed. I starred in the music video for "Da Ya Think I'm Sexy?" with Rod Stewart—he was such a gentleman—and "Hot for Teacher" by Van Halen. And when I was 59, PETA chose me as the world's sexiest vegetarian woman over 50. It was fun to get a beauty title at that age! I'm a strict vegan and an animal activist; I'm committed to eating only from the plant world.

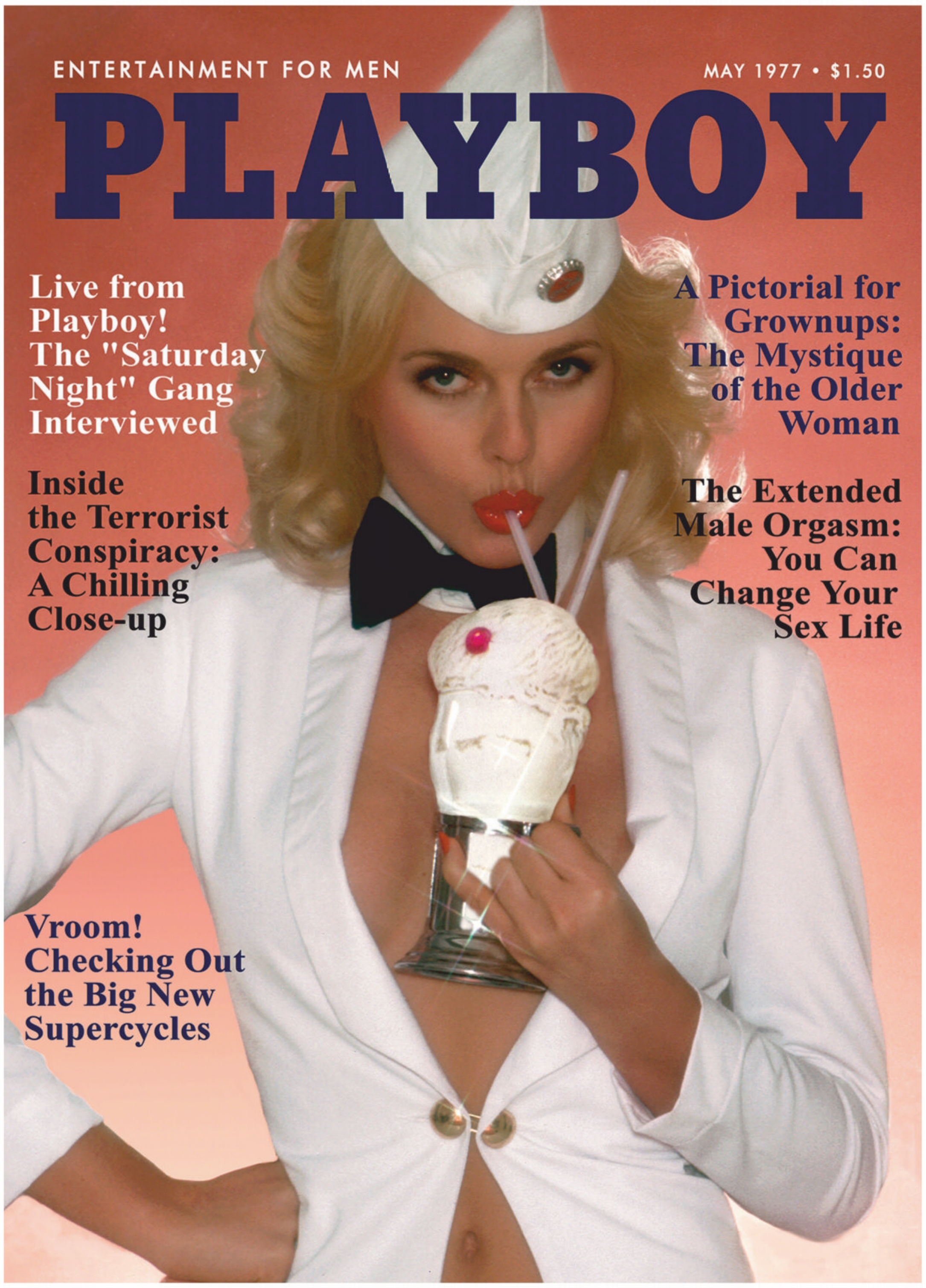
Now, at 68, I am officially a senior citizen in Norway, and I truly believe the best is yet to come. I just wrote a self-help book that was published in Norway. It's called *Si JA til Livet!*—"Say YES to Life!" The plan is to have my daughter translate it into English for American publication next year. My first book, *Feel Great, Be Beautiful Over 40,* came out in 1995, and it took me from sex symbol to health guru. In my new book I talk about health and recipes for wellness, longevity and staying youthful—but also a lot about spiritual growth.

I'm on a mission these days; my life's work now is helping other people blossom and reach their highest potential. I'm proud of the way I look, especially at my age, and that's part of my message: Take good care of yourself, stay positive, maintain a healthy outlook, stay vital. Remember this advice: "Be the change you want to see." That's what I do. I live my life like that. I ask myself every day, What can I do to make a difference? How can I help others? That's what turns me on. I feel good when I go to bed, knowing I did something I can be proud of.

I'm not ashamed of my body. When people are judgmental about nudity or put down others or are critical, I think it's because they don't really like themselves that much. I'm so proud to be in PLAYBOY. Without PLAYBOY, I wouldn't have my daughter, the most precious thing in my life, because I met her father in America. And I wouldn't be in the position I am now, where I have the power to positively influence people. I've had such an unbelievably great career—a little farm girl from nowhere in Norway. God works in mysterious ways, you know?

***Opening photo:** Müller's June 1976 Playmate of the Year cover photo. "I remember shooting it at the Playboy Mansion," she says. "It's an unusual, unique cover. I'm very proud of all my PLAYBOY covers. My daughter thinks they're phenomenal!" **Above:** "That was Hugh Hefner's bathtub," Müller says about this outtake from her August 1975 Scandinavian Modern pictorial, shot by Suze Randall. **Left:** "I've never been ashamed of taking my clothes off for PLAYBOY," says Müller. **Below:** An outtake from Müller's 1976 Playmate of the Year feature, shot at the Playboy Mansion in Los Angeles by Richard Fegley.*

Above: *"I had so much fun with all my pictorials," says Müller.* ***Right:*** *"A cover always took a long time, and the ice cream kept melting," Müller recalls about this shoot for the May 1977 issue. "They were desperate, and someone came up with the idea of using mashed potatoes. It worked, but it loses a little of the romance when you know that secret!"*



ENTERTAINMENT FOR MEN

MAY 1977 • $1.50

PLAYBOY

Live from Playboy! The "Saturday Night" Gang Interviewed

Inside the Terrorist Conspiracy: A Chilling Close-up

Vroom! Checking Out the Big New Supercycles

A Pictorial for Grownups: The Mystique of the Older Woman

The Extended Male Orgasm: You Can Change Your Sex Life

Previous spread and this page, middle: Outtakes from Müller's PMOY pictorial. "Photo editor Marilyn Grabowski supervised the shoot at Playboy Mansion West," Müller says. "She was phenomenal. Marilyn taught me so much." **Top and bottom:** "She is a very good photographer, there's no doubt about it," says Müller of Randall, who convinced her to pose nude and created these shots.

My life's work now is helping other people blossom and reach their highest potential.

Above and right: *Müller in photos shot by Suze Randall in London, before* PLAYBOY *invited them both to Chicago. "Her pictures got me into* PLAYBOY,*" says Müller.*

PLAYBOY
SEXUAL WELLNESS
The best kind of all-nighter.
PLAYBOY
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VINTAGE ADVISOR

Come one, come all: We believe sexual climax is one of life's greatest pleasures. Here, the Playboy Advisor deals with one man's indifference to his partner's orgasm

From the May 1985 PLAYBOY

My girlfriend likes to make love on top. She says that the missionary position is a sexist relic—that the male-superior position doesn't give women enough stimulation. Well, goddamn it, I like the power, the view, the exercise that I get when I'm on top. Can you say anything in defense of the missionary position?—T.P., New York, New York

The missionary position has gotten a lot of bad press—a lot of it from missionaries. But there's nothing intrinsically wrong with it. Two New York–based sex researchers, Edward and Joanne Eichel, taught a group of women a sexual-alignment technique to enhance the standard missionary position. The male adopts a "riding high" position, in which his pelvis overrides the female's mons area. In addition, the couple try to grind their pubic regions together, rather than resort to the old in and out. The alignment provides constant clitoral contact. The two techniques combined give an effective twist. Almost 77 percent of the women in the research group said that they always or almost always reached orgasm in the missionary position, compared with 27 percent of females in the control group.

We Revisit and Reflect

Sooner or later, missionary becomes the go-to sex position for many couples. It's old faithful. You can do it with your eyes closed, literally and metaphorically. But as T.P.'s girlfriend correctly asserts, missionary alone is rarely enough for women. As determined by a 2017 study in the *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy,* only about two in 10 women can come from penetrative sex alone. Why? Because penetrative sex does not create friction against the clitoris, the female sex organ that, for many women, makes sex *feel* good. In the same 2017 study, 37 percent of women said clitoral stimulation was necessary for them to orgasm during intercourse.

As a sex columnist, I can call up defense after defense of missionary-position sex. For example, imaginative bedroom power plays that use the position are exciting as long as both (or all) partners are onboard. But missionary is not the problem here. Hubris is.

A woman is voicing her concern that a sex position is not stimulating. That is the beginning, the middle and the end of this question. The writer, however, is more invested in his own dominance. His girlfriend's pleasure is secondary.

On that point, not much has changed since 1985. That's me speaking from personal experience. One of my pet peeves is when a man asks postcoitus whether I came or not. Many of my female friends have complained about the same thing, their male partners seemingly ignoring their pleasure points during sex.

This deficit is called the orgasm gap, a term that has taken off in the past decade as women have grown more vocal about their partners' inability to get them off. In 2017, a study published in *Archives of Sexual Behavior* found that 65 percent of heterosexual women usually reached orgasm during sex with their partners, compared with a whopping 95 percent of heterosexual men. In comparison, 89 percent of gay men always got off, as did 86 percent of gay women.

Men who have sex with women should be aware of these statistics, especially if they're interested in fostering healthy, long-term relationships.

Today, treating sexual satisfaction as an afterthought no longer suffices in relationships. Exerting your power by limiting the sex positions you'll practice qualifies as promoting a form of sexual inequality. No doubt it's a side effect of the gender inequality we're working to dismantle.

Now the good news: Any heterosexual couple can implement a few easy tweaks in their lovemaking to close that gap. Begin to think of clitoral stimulation during sex as non-negotiable. That will lead you into positions in which the clitoris can be stimulated throughout intercourse. (Our 1985 Advisor's advice is still relevant on this point.)

You can also modify the missionary position to allow for more clitoral stimulation. Ask your girlfriend to toss her legs over your shoulders or crisscross them on your chest. She can also lie back on the edge of the bed while you stand over her, which gives both of you manual access to her genitalia. Men, reach down between her legs and massage her clit while you're inside her, or try using a vibrating ring such as Dame's Fin ($75) or Lelo's Tor 2 ($139), or a dual-tip vibrator like Crave's Duet Flex ($109). Doggy style similarly frees up the hands for clitoral caressing.

The simplest solution is the most rewarding: Keep her happy by changing up how you have sex. It's not in the Advisor's interest to ban any sex position; this is PLAYBOY, after all. True to our DNA, we suggest you try *more* sex. Too often sexual intercourse turns into a compromise between two people. Sexual pleasure occurs when you participate in it equally.—*Maria Del Russo*

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LAS VEGAS, 1972

Temperatures rose into the triple digits during the shoot to illustrate PLAYBOY's provocative December 1972 article *My First Orgy.* Staff photographer Richard Fegley (top left) gathered more than two dozen Vegas performers as his models, many of whom appear in this behind-the-scenes image taken by Ken Frantz.

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